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MAY 1895.

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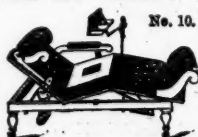
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THE CORNHILL MAGAZINE.

MAY 1895.

*THE STORY OF BESSIE COSTRELL*¹

BY MRS. HUMPHRY WARD.

SCENE I.

It was an August evening, still and cloudy after a day unusually chilly for the time of year. Now, about sunset, the temperature was warmer than it had been in the morning, and the departing sun was forcing its way through the clouds, breaking up their level masses into delicate latticework of golds and greys. The last radiant light was on the wheat fields under the hill, and on the long chalk hill itself. Against that glowing background lay the village, already engulfed by the advancing shadow. All the nearer trees, which the daylight had mingled in one green monotony, stood out sharp and distinct, each in its own plane, against the hill. Each natural object seemed to gain a new accent, a more individual beauty, from the vanishing and yet lingering sunlight.

An elderly labourer was walking along the road which led to the village. To his right lay the allotment gardens just beginning to be alive with figures, and the voices of men and children. Beyond them, far ahead, rose the square tower of the church; to his left was the hill, and straight in front of him the village, with its veils of smoke lightly brushed over the trees, and its lines of cottages climbing the chalk steeps behind it. His eye as he walked took in a number of such facts as life had trained it to notice. Once he stopped to bend over a fence, to pluck a stalk or two of oats; he examined them carefully, then he threw back his

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head and sniffed the air, looking all round the sky meanwhile. Yes, the season had been late and harsh, but the fine weather was coming at last. Two or three days' warmth now would ripen even the oats, let alone the wheat.

Well, he was glad. He wanted the harvest over. It would, perhaps, be his last harvest at Clinton Magna, where he had worked, man and boy, for fifty-six years come Michaelmas. His last harvest! A curious pleasure stirred the man's veins as he thought of it, a pleasure in expected change, which seemed to bring back the pulse of youth, to loosen a little the yoke of those iron years that had perforce aged and bent him; though, for sixty-two, he was still hale and strong.

Things had all come together. Here was 'Muster' Hill, the farmer he had worked for these seventeen years, dying of a sudden, with a carbuncle on the neck, and the farm to be given up at Michaelmas. He—John Bolderfield—had been working on for the widow; but, in his opinion, she was 'nobbut a caseltly sort of body,' and the sooner she and her children were taken off to Barnet, where they were to live with her mother, the less she'd cost them as had the looking after her. As for the crops, they wouldn't pay the debts; not they. And there was no one after the farm—'nary one'—and didn't seem like to be. That would make another farm on Muster Forrest's hands. Well, and a good job. Landlords must be 'took down'; and there was plenty of work going on the railway just now for those that were turned off.

He was too old for the railway, though, and he might have found it hard to get fresh work if he had been staying at Clinton. But he was not staying. Poor Eliza wouldn't last more than a few days; a week or two at most, and he was not going to keep on the cottage after he'd buried her.

Aye, poor Eliza! She was his sister-in-law, the widow of his second brother. He had been his brother's lodger during the greater part of his working life, and since Tom's death he had stayed on with Eliza. She and he suited each other, and the 'worritin' childer' had all gone away years since and left them in peace. He didn't believe Eliza knew where any of them were, except Mary, 'married over to Luton'—and Jim, and Jim's Louisa. And a good riddance too. There was not one of them knew how to keep a shilling when they'd got one. Still, it was a bit lonesome for Eliza now, with no one but Jim's Louisa to look after her.

He grew rather downhearted as he trudged along, thinking,

She and he had stuck together 'a many year.' There would be nobody left for him to go along with when she was gone. There was his niece Bessie Costrell and her husband, and there was his silly old cousin Widow Waller. He dared say they'd both of them want him to live with them. At the thought a grin crossed his ruddy face. They both knew about *it*—that was what it was. And he wouldn't live with either of them, not he. Not yet a bit, anyway. All the same, he had a fondness for Bessie and her husband. Bessie was always very civil to *him*—he chuckled again --and if anything had to be done with *it*, while he was five miles off at Frampton on a job of work that had been offered him, he didn't know but he'd as soon trust Isaac Costrell and Bessie as anybody else. You might call Isaac rather a fool, what with his religion, and 'extempy prayin, an that,' but all the same Bolderfield thought of him with a kind of uneasy awe. If ever there was a man secure of the next world it was Isaac Costrell. His temper, perhaps, was 'nasty,' which might pull him down a little when the last account came to be made up; and it could not be said that his elder children had come to much, for all his piety. But, on the whole, Bolderfield only wished he stood as well with the powers talked about in chapel every Sunday as Isaac did.

As for Bessie, she had been a wasteful woman all her life, with never a bit of money put by, and never a good dress to her back. But, 'Lor bless yer, there was a many worse folk nor Bessie.' She wasn't one of your sour people—she could make you laugh; she had a merry heart. Many a pleasant evening had he passed chatting with her and Isaac; and whenever they cooked anything good there was always a bite for him. Yes, Bessie had been a good niece to him; and if he trusted anyone he dared say he'd trust them.

'Well, how's Eliza, Muster Bolderfield?' said a woman who passed him in the village street.

He replied, and then went his way, sobered again, dreading to find himself at the cottage once more, and in the stuffy upper room with the bed and the dying woman. Yet he was not really sad, not here at least, out in the air and the sun. There was always a thought in his mind, a fact in his consciousness, which stood between him and sadness. It had so stood for a long, long time. He walked through the village to-night in spite of Eliza and his sixty years with a free bearing and a confident glance to right and left. He knew, and the village knew, that he was not as other men.

He passed the village green with its pond, and began to climb a lane leading to the hill. Half way up stood two cottages sideways. Phloxes and marigolds grew untidily about their doorways, and straggly roses, starved a little by the chalk soil, looked in at their latticed windows. They were, however, comparatively modern and comfortable, with two bedrooms above and two living rooms below, far superior to the older and more picturesque cottages in the main street.

John went in softly, put down his straw dinner-bag, and took off his heavy boots. Then he opened a door in the wall of the kitchen, and gently climbed the stairs.

A girl was sitting by the bed. When she saw his whitish head and red face emerge against the darkness of the stair-hole, she put up her finger for silence.

John crept in and came to look at the patient. His eyes grew round and staring, his colour changed.

'Is she a-goin?' he said, with evident excitement.

Jim's Louisa shook her head. She was rather a stupid girl, heavy and round-faced, but she had nursed her grandmother well.

'No, she's asleep. Muster Drew's been here, and she dropped off while he was a-talkin to her.'

Mr. Drew was the Congregational minister.

'Did she send for him?'

'Yes; she said she felt her feet a-gettin cold and I must run. But I don't believe she's no worse.'

John stood looking down, ruefully. Suddenly the figure in the bed turned.

'John,' said a comparatively strong voice which made Bolderfield start, 'John—Muster Drew says you'd oughter put it in the bank. You'll be a fool if yer don't, 'ee says.'

The old woman's pinched face emerged from the sheets, looking up at him. Bluish patches showed here and there on the drawn white skin; there was a great change since the morning, but the eyes were still alive.

John was silent a moment, one corner of his mouth twitching, as though what she had said struck him in a humorous light.

'Well, I don't know as I mind much what 'ee says, 'Liza?'

'Sit down.'

She made a movement with her emaciated hand. John sat down on the chair Louisa gave up to him, and bent down over the bed.

'If yer woan't do—what Muster Drew says, John—whatever *will* yer do with it?'

She spoke slowly, but clearly. John scratched his head. His complexion had evidently been very fair. It was still fresh and pink, and the full cheek hung a little over the jaw. The mouth was shrewd, but its expression was oddly contradicted by the eyes, which had on the whole a childish, weak look.

'I think yer must leave it to me, 'Liza,' he said at last. 'I'll do all for the best.'

'No—yer'll not, John,' said the dying voice. 'You'd a done a many stupid things—if I 'adn't stopped yer. An I'm a-goin. You'll never leave it wi Bessie?'

'An who 'ud yer 'ave me leave it with? Ain't Bessie my own sister's child?'

An emaciated hand stole out of the bed-clothes and fastened feebly on his arm.

'If yer do, John, yer'll repent it. Yer never were a good one at judgin folk. Yer doan't consider nothin—an I'm a-goin. Leave it with Saunders, John.'

There was a pause. Then John said with an obstinate look,

'Saunders 'as never been a friend o' mine, since 'ee did me out o' that bit o' business with Missus Moulsey. An I don't mean to go makin friends with him again.'

Eliza withdrew her hand with a long sigh, and her eyelids closed. A fit of coughing shook her; she had to be lifted in bed, and it left her gasping and deathly. John was sorely troubled, and not only for himself. When she was more at ease again, he stooped to her and put his mouth to her ear.

'Liza, don't yer think no more about it. Did Mr. Drew read to yer? Are yer comfortable in yer mind?'

She made a sign of assent, which showed, however, no great interest in the subject. There was silence for a long time. Louisa was getting supper downstairs. John, oppressed by the heat of the room and tired by his day's work, had almost fallen asleep in his chair, when the old woman spoke again.

'John—what 'ud you think o' Mary Anne Waller?'

The whisper was still human and eager.

John roused himself, and could not help an astonished laugh.

'Why, whatever put Mary Anne into your head, 'Liza? Yer never thought anythink o' Mary Anne—no more than me.'

Eliza's eyes wandered round the room.

‘P’raps——’ she said, then stopped, and could say no more. She seemed to become unconscious, and John went to call for Louisa.

In the middle of the night John woke with a start, and sat up to listen. Not a sound—but they would have called him if the end had come. He could not rest, however, and presently he huddled on some clothes and went to listen at Eliza’s door. It was ajar, and hearing nothing he pushed it open.

Poor Eliza lay in her agony, unconscious, and breathing heavily. Beside her sat the widow, Mary Anne Waller, and Louisa, motionless too, their heads bent. There was an end of candle in a basin behind the bed, which threw circles of wavering light over the coarse whitewash of the roof and on the cards and faded photographs above the tiny mantelpiece.

John crept up to the bed. The two women made a slight movement to let him stand between them.

‘Can’t yer give her no brandy?’ he asked, whispering.

Mary Anne Waller shook her head.

‘Dr. Murch said we wer’n’t to trouble her. She’ll go when the light comes—most like.’

She was a little shrivelled woman with a singularly delicate mouth, that quivered as she spoke. John and Eliza Bolderfield had never thought much of her, though she was John’s cousin. She was a widow, and greatly ‘put upon’ both by her children and her neighbours. Her children were grown up, and settled—more or less—in the world, but they still lived on her freely whenever it suited them; and in the village generally she was reckoned but a poor creature.

However, when Eliza—originally a hard, strong woman—took to her bed with incurable disease, Mary Anne Waller came in to help, and was accepted. She did everything humbly; she even let Louisa order her about. But before the end, Eliza had come to be restless when she was not there.

Now, however, Eliza knew no more, and the little widow sat gazing at her with the tears on her cheeks. John, too, felt his eyes wet.

But after half-an-hour, when there was still no change, he was turning away to go back to bed, when the widow touched his arm.

‘Won’t yer give her a kiss, John?’ she said timidly. ‘She wor a good sister to you.’

John, with a tremor, stooped, and clumsily did as he was told

—the first time in his life he had ever done so for Mary Anne. Then, stepping as noiselessly as he could on his bare feet, he hurried away. A man shares nothing of that yearning attraction which draws women to a death-bed as such. Instead, John felt a sudden sickness at his heart. He was thankful to find himself in his own room again, and thought with dread of having to go back—for the end. In spite of his still vigorous and stalwart body he was often plagued with nervous fears and fancies. And it was years now since he had seen death—he had indeed carefully avoided seeing it.

Gradually, however, as he sat on the edge of his bed in the summer dark, the new impression died away, and something habitual took its place—that shielding, solacing thought, which was in truth all the world to him, and was going to make up to him for Eliza's death, for getting old, and the lonesomeness of a man without chick or child. He would have felt unutterably forlorn and miserable, he would have shrunk trembling from the shapes of death and pain that seemed to fill the darkness, but for this fact, this defence, this treasure, that set him apart from his fellows and gave him this proud sense of superiority, of a good time coming in spite of all. Instinctively, as he sat on the bed, he pushed his bare foot backwards till his heel touched a wooden object that stood underneath. The contact cheered him at once. He ceased to think about Eliza, his head was once more full of whirling plans and schemes.

The wooden object was a box that held his money, the savings of a labourer's life-time. Seventy-one pounds! It seemed to him an ocean of gold, never to be exhausted. The long toil of saving it was almost done. After the Frampton job, he would begin enjoying it, cautiously at first, taking a bit of work now and again, and then a bit of holiday.

All the savour of life was connected for him with that box. His mind ran over the constant excitements of the many small loans he had made from it to his relations and friends. A shilling in the pound interest—he had never taken less and he had never asked more. He had only lent to people he knew well, people in the village whom he could look after, and seldom for a term longer than three months, for to be parted from his money at all gave him physical pain. He had once suffered great anxiety over a loan to his eldest brother of thirty pounds. But in the end James had paid it all back. He could still feel tingling through him

the passionate joy with which he had counted out the recovered sovereigns, with the extra three half-sovereigns of interest.

Muster Drew indeed ! John fell into an angry inward argument against his suggestion of the savings bank. It was an argument he had often rehearsed, often declaimed, and at bottom it all came to this—without that box under his bed, his life would have sunk to dulness and decrepitude ; he would have been merely a pitiful and lonely old man. He had neither wife nor children, all for the hoard's sake ; but while the hoard was there, to be handled any hour, he regretted nothing. Besides, there was the peasant's rooted distrust of offices, and paper transactions, of any routine that checks his free will and frightens his inexperience. He was still eagerly thinking when the light began to flood into his room, and before he could compose himself to sleep the women called him.

But he shed no more tears. He saw Eliza die, his companion of forty years, and hardly felt it. What troubled him all through the last scene was the thought that now he should never know why she was so set against ' Bessie's 'avin it.'

SCENE II.

It was, indeed, the general opinion in Clinton Magna that John Bolderfield—or ' Borrofull,' as the village pronounced it, took his sister-in-law's death too lightly. The women especially pronounced him a hard heart. Here was ' poor Eliza ' gone, Eliza who had kept him decent and comfortable for forty years, ever since he was a lad, and he could go about whistling, and—to talk to him—as gay as a lark ! Yet John contributed handsomely to the burial expenses—Eliza having already, through her burial club, provided herself with a more than regulation interment ; and he gave Jim's Louisa her mourning. Nevertheless these things did not avail. It was felt instinctively that he was not beaten down as he ought to have been, and Mrs. Saunders, the smith's wife, was applauded when she said to her neighbours that ' you couldn't expeck a man with John Bolderfield's money to have as many feelins as other people.' Whence it would seem that the capitalist is no more truly popular in small societies than in large.

John, however, did not trouble himself about these things. He was hard at work harvesting for Muster Hill's widow, and puzzling his head day and night as to what to do with his box.

When the last field had been carried and the harvest supper was over, he came home late, and wearied out. His working life at Clinton Magna was done; and the family he had worked for so long was broken up in distress and poverty. Yet he felt only a secret exultation. Such toil and effort behind—such a dream-land in front!

Next day he set to work to wind up his affairs. The furniture of the cottage was left to Eliza's son Jim, and the daughter had arranged for the carting of it to the house twelve miles off where her parents lived. She was to go with it on the morrow, and John would give up the cottage and walk over to Frampton, where he had already secured a lodging.

Only twenty-four hours!—and he had not yet decided. Which was it to be—Saunders after all—or the savings bank—or Bessie?

He was cording up his various possessions—a medley lot—in different parcels and bundles when Bessie Costrell knocked at the door. She had already offered to stow away anything he might like to leave with her.

'Well, I thought you'd be busy,' she said as she walked in, 'an I came up to lend a hand. Is them the things you're goin to leave me to take care on?'

John nodded.

'Field's cart, as takes Louisa's things to-morrer, is a-goin to deliver these at your place first. They're more nor I thought they would be. But you can put 'em anywheres.'

'Oh, I'll see to them.'

She sat down and watched him tie the knots of the last parcel.

'There's some people as is real ill-natured,' she said presently, in an angry voice.

'Aye?' said John looking up sharply. 'What are they sayin now?'

'It's Muster Saunders. 'Ee's allus sayin nasty things about other folks. And there'd be plenty of fault to be found with 'im, if onybody was to try. An Sally Saunders eggs him on dreadful.'

Saunders was the village smith, a tall, brawny man, of great size and corresponding wisdom, who had been the village arbiter and general councillor for a generation. There was not a will made in Clinton Magna that he did not advise upon; not a bit of contentious business that he had not a share in; not a family history that he did not know. His probity was undisputed; his

ability was regarded with awe; but as he had a sharp tongue and was no respecter of persons, there was of course an opposition.

John took a seat on the wooden box he had just been cording, and mopped his brow. His full cheeks were crimson, partly with exertion, partly with sudden annoyance.

'What's 'ee been sayin now? Though it doan't matter a brass farthin to me what 'ee says.'

'He says you 'aven't got no proper feelin's about poor Eliza, an you'd ought to have done a great deal more for Louisa. But 'ee says you allus were a mean one with your money—an you knew that 'ee knew it—for 'ee'd stopped you takin an unfair advantage more nor once. An 'ee didn't believe as your money would come to any good; for now Eliza was gone you wouldn't know how to take care on it.'

John's eyes flamed.

'Oh! 'ee says that, do 'ee? Well Saunders wor allus a beast—an a beast 'ee'll be.'

He sat with his chin on his large dirty hands, ruminating furiously.

It was quite true that Saunders had thwarted him more than once. There was old Mrs. Moulsey at the shop, when she wanted to buy those cottages in Potter's Row—and there was Sam Field the higgler—both of them would have borrowed from him if Saunders hadn't cooled them off. Saunders said it was a Jew's interest he was asking—because there was security—but he wasn't going to accept a farthing less than his shilling a pound for three months—not he! So they might take it or leave it. And Mrs. Moulsey got hers from the Building Society, and Sam Field made shift to go without. And John Bolderfield was three pounds poorer that quarter than he need have been—all along of Saunders. And now Saunders was talking 'agen him' like this—blast him!

'Oh, an then he went on'—pursued Bessie with gusto, 'about your bein too ignorant to put it in the post office. 'Ee said you'd think Edwards would go an spend it' (Edwards was the post-master), 'an then he laughed fit to split 'imself. Yer couldn't see more nor the length of your own nose he said,—it was edication *you* wanted. As for 'im, 'ee said, 'ee'd have kep it for you if you'd asked him, but you'd been like a bear with a sore 'ead, 'ee said, ever since Mrs. Moulsey's affair—so 'ee didn't suppose you would.'

'Well, 'ee's about right there,' said John grimly; 'ee's talkin

sense for onst when 'ee says that. I'd dig a hole in the hill and bury it sooner nor I'd trust it to 'im—I would, by——' he swore vigorously. 'A thieving set of magpies is all them Saunders—cadgin 'ere and cadgin there.'

He spoke with fierce contempt, the tacit hatred of years leaping to sight. Bessie's bright brown eyes looked at him with sympathy.

'It was just his nassty spite,' she said. 'He knew 'ee could never ha done it—not what you've done—out o' your wages. Not unless 'ee got Sally to tie 'im to the dresser with ropes so as 'ee couldn't go a-near the "Spotted Deer" no more!'

She laughed like a merry child at her own witticism, and John relished it too, though he was not in a laughing mood.

'Why'—continued Bessie with enthusiasm, 'it was Muster Drew as said to me the other afternoon, as we was walkin 'ome from the churchyard, says 'ee, "Mrs. Costrell, I call it splendid what's John's done—I *do*," 'ee says. "A labourer on fifteen shillin's a week—why it's an example to the county," 'ee says. "'Ee ought to be showed."'

John's face relaxed. The temper and obstinacy in the eyes began to yield to the weak complacency which was their more normal expression.

There was silence for a minute or two. Bessie sat with her hands on her lap and her face turned towards the open door. Beyond the cherry-red phloxes outside it, the ground fell rapidly to the village, rising again beyond the houses to a great stubble field, newly shorn. Gleaners were already in the field, their bent figures casting sharp shadows on the golden upland, and the field itself stretched upwards to a great wood that lay folded round the top of a spreading hill. To the left, beyond the hill, a wide plain travelled into the sunset, its level spaces cut by the scrawled elms and hedgerows of the nearer landscape. The beauty of it all—the beauty of an English midland—was of a modest and measured sort, depending chiefly on bounties of sun and air, on the delicacies of gentle curves and the pleasant intermingling of wood and cornfield, of light spaces with dark, of solid earth with luminous sky.

Such as it was, however, neither Bessie nor John spared it a moment's attention. Bessie was thinking a hundred busy thoughts. John, on the other hand, had begun to consider her with an excited scrutiny. She was a handsome woman, as she

sat in the doorway with her fine brown head turned to the light. But John naturally was not thinking of that. He was in the throes of decision.

'Look 'ere, Bessie,' he said suddenly; 'what 'ud you say if I wor to ask Isaac an you to take care on it?'

Bessie started slightly. Then she looked frankly round at him. She had very keen, lively eyes, and a bright red-brown colour on thin cheeks. The village applied to her the epithet which John's thoughts had applied to Muster Hill's widow. They said she was 'caselty,' which means flighty, haphazard, excitable; but she was popular, nevertheless, and had many friends.

It was, of course, her own settled opinion that her uncle ought to leave that box with her and Isaac; and it had wounded her vanity, and her affection besides, that John had never yet made any such proposal, though she knew—as, indeed, the village knew—that he was perplexed as to what to do with his hoard. But she had never dared to suggest that he should leave it with her, out of fear of Eliza Bolderfield. Bessie was well aware that Eliza thought ill of her and would dissuade John from any such arrangement if she could. And so formidable was Eliza—a woman of the hardest and sourest virtue—when she chose, that Bessie was afraid of her, even on her death-bed, though generally ready enough to quarrel with other people. Nevertheless, Bessie had always felt that it would be a crying shame and slight if she and Isaac did not have the guardianship of the money. She thirsted, perhaps, to make an impression upon public opinion in the village, which, as she instinctively realised, held her cheaply. And then, of course, there was the secret thought of John's death and what might come of it. John had always loudly proclaimed that he meant to spend his money, and not leave it behind him. But the instinct of saving, once formed, is strong. John, too, might die sooner than he thought—and she and Isaac had children.

She had come up, indeed, that afternoon, haunted by a passionate desire to get the money into her hands; yet the mere sordidness of 'expectations' counted for less in the matter than one would suppose. Vanity, a vague wish to ingratiate herself with her uncle, to avoid a slight—these were, on the whole, her strongest motives. At any rate, when he had once asked her the momentous question, she knew well what to say to him.

'Well, if you arst me,' she said, hastily, 'of course *we* think as it's only nateral you should leave it with Isaac an me, as is

your own kith and kin. But we wasn't goin to say nothing; we didn't want to be pushin of ourselves forward.'

John rose to his feet. He was in his shirt-sleeves, which were rolled up. He pulled them down, put on his coat, an air of crisis on his fat face.

'Where 'ud you put it?' he said.

'Yer know that cupboard by the top of the stairs? It 'ud stand there easy. And the cupboard's got a good lock to it; but we'd 'ave it seen to, to make sure.'

She looked up at him eagerly. She longed to feel herself trusted and important. Her self-love was too often mortified in these respects.

John fumbled round his neck for the bit of black cord on which he kept two keys—the key of his room while he was away, and the key of the box itself.

'Well, let's get done with it,' he said. 'I'm off to-morrer mornin, six o'clock. You go and get Isaac to come down.'

'I'll run,' said Bessie, catching up her shawl and throwing it over her head. 'He wor just finishin his tea.'

And she whirled out of the cottage, running up the steep road behind it as fast as she could. John was vaguely displeased by her excitement; but the die was cast. He went to make his arrangements.

Bessie ran till she was out of breath. When she reached her own house, a cottage in a side lane above the Bolderfields' cottage and overlooking it from the back, she found her husband sitting with his pipe at the open door and reading his newspaper. Three out of her own four children were playing in the lane, otherwise there was no one about.

Isaac greeted her with a nod and slight lightening of the eyes, which, however, hardly disturbed the habitual sombreness of the face. He was a dark, finely featured man, with grizzled hair, carrying himself with an air of sleepy melancholy. He was much older than his wife, and was a prominent leader in the little Independent chapel of the village. His melancholy could give way on occasion to fits of violent temper. For instance, he had been almost beside himself when Bessie, who had leanings to the Establishment, as providing a far more crowded and entertaining place of resort on Sundays than her husband's chapel, had rashly proposed to have the youngest baby christened in church. Other Independents did it freely—why not she? But Isaac had been nearly mad with

wrath, and Bessie had fled upstairs from him, with her baby, and bolted the bedroom door in bodily terror. Otherwise, he was a most docile husband—in the neighbours' opinion, docile to absurdity. He complained of nothing, and took notice of little. Bessie's untidy ways left him indifferent; his main interest was in a kind of religious dreaming, and in an Independent paper to which he occasionally wrote a letter. He was gardener at a small house on the hill, and had rather more education than most of his fellows in the village. For the rest, he was fond of his children, and, in his heart of hearts, exceedingly proud of his wife, her liveliness and her good looks. She had been a remarkably pretty girl when he married her, some eight years after his first wife's death, and there was a great difference of age between them. His two elder children by his first marriage had long since left the home. The girl was in service. It troubled him to think of the boy, who had fallen into bad ways early. Bessie's children were all small, and she herself still young, though over thirty.

When Bessie came up to him, she looked round to see that no one could hear. Then she stooped and told him her errand in a panting whisper. He must go down and fetch the box at once. She had promised John Borrofull that they would stand by him. They were his own flesh and blood—and the cupboard had a capital lock—and there wasn't no fear of it at all.

Isaac listened to her at first with amazement, then sulkily. She had talked to him often certainly about John's money, but it had made little impression on his dreamer's sense. And now her demand struck him disagreeably.

He didn't want the worrit of other people's money, he said. Let them as owned it keep it; filthy lucre was a snare to all as had to do with it; and it would only bring a mischief to have it in the house.

After a few more of these objections, Bessie lost her temper. She broke into a torrent of angry arguments and reproaches, mainly turning, it seemed, upon a recent visit to the house of Isaac's eldest son. The drunken ne'er-do-weel had given Bessie much to put up with. Oh, yes!—*she* was to be plagued out of her life by Isaac's belongings, and he wouldn't do a pin's worth for her. Just let him see next time, that was all.

Isaac smoked vigorously through it all. But she was hammering on a sore point.

'Oh, it's just like yer!' Bessie flung at him at last in despera-

tion. 'You're alius the same—a mean-spirited feller, stannin in your children's way! 'Ow do *you* know who old John's going to leave his money to? 'Ow do *you* know as he wouldn't leave it to *them* poor innercents'—she waved her hand tragically towards the children playing in the road—'if we was just a bit nice and friendly with him now 'ee's gettin old? But you don't care, not you!—one 'ud think yer were made o' money—an that little un there not got the right use of his legs!'

She pointed, half crying, to the second boy, who had already shown signs of hip disease.

Isaac still smoked, but he was troubled in his mind. A vague presentiment held him, but the pressure brought to bear upon him was strong.

'I tell yer the lock isn't a good 'un!' he said, suddenly removing his pipe.

Bessie stopped instantly in the middle of another tirade. She was leaning against the door, arms akimbo, eyes alternately wet and flaming.

'Then, if it isn't,' she said, with a triumphant change of tone, 'I'll soon get Flack to see to it—it's nobbut a step. I'll run up after supper.'

Flack was the village carpenter.

'An there's mother's old box as takes up the cupboard,' continued Isaac gruffly.

Bessie burst out laughing.

'Oh! yer old silly,' she said. 'As if they couldn't stand one top o' the t'other. Now, do just go, Isaac—there's a lovey! 'Ee's waitin for yer. Whatever did make yer so contrairy? Of course I didn't mean nothin I said—an I don't mind Timothy, nor nothin.'

Still he did not move.

'Then I s'pose yer want everybody in the village to know?' he said with sarcasm.

Bessie was taken aback.

'No—I—don't—' she said undecidedly—'I don't know what yer mean.'

'You go back and tell John as I'll come when it's dark, an, if he's not a stupid, he won't want me to come afore.'

Bessie understood and acquiesced. She ran back with her message to John.

At half-past eight, when it had grown almost dark, Isaac descended the hill. John opened the door to his knock.

'Good evenin, Isaac. Yer'll take it, will yer?'

'If you can't do nothin better with it,' said Isaac, unwillingly. 'But in ginerall I'm not partial on keeping other folk's money.'

John liked him all the better for his reluctance.

'It'll give yer no trouble,' he said. 'You lock it up, an it'll be all safe. Now, will yer lend a hand?'

Isaac stepped to the door, looked up the lane, and saw that all was quiet. Then he came back, and the two men raised the box.

As they crossed the threshold, however, the door of the next cottage—which belonged to Watson, the policeman—opened suddenly. John, in his excitement, was so startled that he almost dropped his end of the box.

'Why, Bolderfield,' said Watson's cheery voice, 'what have you got there? Do you want a hand?'

'No, I don't—thank yer kindly,' said John in agitation. 'An, if *you* please, Muster Watson, don't yer say nothin to nobody.'

The burly policeman looked from John to Isaac, then at the box. John's hoard was notorious, and the officer of the law understood.

'Lor bless yer,' he said, with a laugh, 'I'm safe. Well, good evenin to yer, if I can't be of any assistance.'

And he went off on his beat.

The two men carried the box up the hill. It was in itself a heavy, old-fashioned affair, strengthened and bottomed with iron. Isaac wondered whether the weight of it were due more to the box or to the money. But he said nothing. He had no idea how much John might have saved, and would not have asked him the direct question for the world. John's own way of talking about his wealth was curiously contradictory. His 'money' was rarely out of his thoughts or speech, but no one had ever been privileged for many years now to see the inside of his box, except Eliza once; and no one but himself knew the exact amount of the hoard. It delighted him that the village gossips should double or treble it. Their estimates only gave him the more ground for vague boasting, and he would not have said a word to put them right.

When they reached the Costrells' cottage, John's first care was to examine the cupboard. He saw that the large wooden chest filled with odds and ends of rubbish which already stood there was placed on the top of his own box. Then he tried the lock, and pronounced it adequate; he didn't want to have Flack meddling

round. Now at the moment of parting with his treasure he was seized with a sudden fever of secrecy. Bessie meanwhile hovered about the two men, full of excitement and loquacity. And the children, shut into the kitchen, wondered what could be the matter.

When all was done, Isaac locked the cupboard, and solemnly presented the key to John, who added it to the other round his neck. Then Bessie unlocked the kitchen, and set the children flying, to help her with the supper. She was in her most bustling and vivacious mood, and she had never cooked the bloaters better or provided a more ample jug of beer. But John was silent and depressed.

He took leave at last with many sighs and lingerings. But he had not been gone half an hour, and Bessie and Isaac were just going to bed, when there was a knock at the door, and he reappeared.

'Let me lie down there,' he said, pointing to a broken-down old sofa that ran under the window. 'I'm lonesome somehow, an I've told Louisa.' His white hair and whiskers stood out wildly round his red face. He looked old and ill, and the sympathetic Bessie was sorry for him.

She made him a bed on the sofa, and he lay there all night, restless, and sighing heavily. He missed Eliza more than he had done yet, and was oppressed with a vague sense of unhappiness. Once, in the middle of the night when all was still, he stole up-stairs in his stocking feet and gently tried the cupboard door. It was quite safe, and he went down contented.

An hour or two later he was off, trudging to Frampton through the August dawn, with his bundle on his back.

SCENE III.

Some five months passed away.

One January night the Independent minister of Clinton Magna was passing down the village street. Clinton lay robed in light snow, and 'sparkling to the moon.' The frozen pond beside the green, though it was nearly eight o'clock, was still alive with children, sliding and shouting. All around the gabled roofs stood laden and spotless. The woods behind the village, and those running along the top of the snowy hill, were meshed in a silvery mist which died into the moonlit blue, while in the fields the sharpness of the shadows thrown by the scattered trees made a marvel of black and white.

The minister, in spite of a fighting creed, possessed a measure of gentler susceptibilities, and the beauty of this basin in the chalk hills, this winter triumphant, these lights of home and fellowship in the cottage windows disputing with the forlornness of the snow, crept into his soul. His mind travelled from the physical purity and hardness before him to the purity and hardness of the inner life—the purity that Christ blessed, the ‘hardness’ that the Christian endures. And such thoughts brought him pleasure as he walked—the mystic’s pleasure.

Suddenly he saw a woman cross the snowy green in front of him. She had come from the road leading to the hill, and her pace was hurried. Her shawl was muffled round her head, but he recognised her, and his mood fell. She was the wife of Isaac Costrell, and she was hurrying to the ‘Spotted Deer,’ a public-house which lay just beyond the village, on the road to the mill. Already several times that week had he seen her going in or coming out. Talk had begun to reach him, and he said to himself to-night as he saw her,—that Isaac Costrell’s wife was going to ruin.

The thought oppressed him, pricked his pastoral conscience. Isaac was his right-hand man: dull to all the rest of the world, but not dull to the minister. With Mr. Drew sometimes he would break into talk of religion, and the man’s dark eyes would lose their film. His big troubled self spoke with that accent of truth which lifts common talk and halting texts to poetry. The minister, himself more of a pessimist than his sermons showed, felt a deep regard for him. Could nothing be done to save Isaac’s wife and Isaac? Not so long ago Bessie Costrell had been a decent woman, though a flighty and excitable one. Now some cause, unknown to the minister, had upset a wavering balance, and was undoing a life.

As he passed the public-house a man came out, and through the open door Mr. Drew caught a momentary glimpse of the bar and the drinkers. Bessie’s handsome, reckless head stood out an instant in the bright light.

Then Drew saw that the man who had emerged was Watson the policeman. They greeted each other cordially and walked on together. Watson also was a member of the minister’s flock. Mr. Drew felt suddenly moved to unburden himself.

‘That was Costrell’s wife, Watson, wasn’t it, poor thing?’

‘Aye, it wor Mrs. Costrell,’ said Watson in the tone of concern natural to the respectable husband and father.

The minister sighed. ‘It’s terrible the way she’s gone down

hill the last three months. I never pass almost but I see her going in there or coming out.'

'No,' said Watson slowly, 'no, it's bad. What I'd like to know,' he added reflectively, 'is where she gets the money from.'

'Oh, she had a legacy, hadn't she, in August? It seems to have been a curse. She has been a changed woman ever since.'

'Yes, she had a legacy,' said Watson, dubiously; 'but I don't believe it was much. She talked big, of course, and made a lot o' fuss—she's that kind o' woman—just as she did about old John's money.'

'Old John's money?—Ah! did anyone ever know what became of that?'

'Well, there's many people thinks as Isaac has got it hid in the house somewhere, and there's others thinks he's put it in Bedford bank. Edwards told me private he didn't know nothing about it at the post office, an Bessie told my wife as John had given Isaac the keepin of it till he come back again; but he'd knock her about, she said, if she let on what he'd done with it. That's the story she's allus had, and boastin, of course, dreadful, about John's trustin them, and Isaac doin all his business for him.'

The minister reflected.—'And you say the legacy wasn't much?'

'Well, sir, I know some people over at Bedford where her aunt lived as left it her, and they were sure it wasn't a great deal; but you never know.'

'And Isaac never said?'

'Bless yer, no sir! He was never a great one for talking, wasn't Isaac; but you'd think now as he'd never learnt how. He'll set there in the Club of a night and never open his mouth to nobody.'

'Perhaps he's fretting about his wife, Watson?'

'Well, I don't believe as he knows much about her goins-on—not all, leastways. I've seen her wait till he was at his work or gone to the Club, and then run down the hill,—tearin—with her hair flyin—you'd think she'd gone silly. Oh, it's a bad business,' said Watson strongly, 'an uncommon bad business—all them young children too.'

'I never saw her drunk, Watson.'

'No—yer wouldn't. Nor I neither. But she'll treat half the parish if she gets the chance. I know many young fellers as go to the "Spotted Deer" just because they know she'll treat 'em. She's a doin of it now—there's lots of 'em. And allus changin

such a queer lot of money too—old half-crowns,—years and years old—King George the Third, sir. No—it's strange—very strange.' The two walked on into the darkness still talking.

Meanwhile, inside the 'Spotted Deer' Bessie Costrell was treating her hangers-on. She had drunk one glass of gin and water—it had made a beauty of her in the judgment of the tap-room, such a kindling had it given to her brown eyes and such a redness to her cheek. Bessie, in truth, had reached her moment of physical prime. The marvel was that there were no lovers in addition to the drinking and the extravagance. But the worst of the village scandalmongers knew of none. Since this new phase of character in her had developed, she would drink and make merry with any young fellow in the place, but it went no farther. She was *bonne camarade* with all the world—no more. Perhaps at bottom some coolness of temperament protected her; nobody, at any rate, suspected that it had anything to do with Isaac, or that she cared a ha'porth for so lugubrious and hypocritical a husband.

She had showered drinks on all her friends, and had, moreover, chattered and screamed herself hoarse, when the church-clock outside slowly struck eight. She started, changed countenance, and got up to pay at once.

'Why, there's another o' them half-crowns o' yourn, Bessie,' said a consumptive-looking girl in a bedraggled hat and feathers, as Mrs. Costrell handed her coin to the landlord. 'Wheriver do yer get 'em?'

'If yer don't ask no questions, I won't tell yer no lies,' said Bessie, with quick impudence. 'Where did you get them hat and feathers?'

There was a coarse laugh from the company. The girl in the hat reddened furiously, and she and Bessie—both of them in a quarrelsome state—began to bandy words.

Meanwhile the landlord was showing the coin to his assistant at the bar.

'Rum, ain't it? I niver seed one o' them pieces in the village afore this winter, an I've been 'ere twenty-two year come April.'

A decent-looking labourer, who did not often visit the 'Spotted Deer,' was leaning over the bar and caught the words.

'Well then, I 'ave,' he said promptly. 'I mind well as when I were a lad, sixteen year ago, my fayther borrowed a bit o' money

off John Bolderfield, to buy a cow with—an there was 'arf of it in them 'arf-crowns.'

Those standing near overheard. Bessie and the girl stopped quarrelling. The landlord, startled, cast a sly eye in Bessie's direction. She came up to the bar.

'What's that yer sayin?' she demanded. The man repeated his remark.

'Well, I dessay there was,' said Bessie—'I dessay there was. I s'pose there's plenty of 'em. Where do I get 'em?—why I get 'em at Bedford, of course, when I goes for my money.'

She looked round defiantly. No one said anything; but everybody instinctively suspected a lie. The sudden silence was striking.

'Well, give me my change, will yer?' she said impatiently to the landlord. 'I can't stan here all night.'

He gave it to her, and she went out showering reckless good-nights, to which there was little response. The door had no sooner closed upon her than everyone in the tap-room pressed round the bar in a close gathering of heads and tongues.

Bessie ran across the green and began to climb the hill at a rapid pace. Her thin woollen shawl blown back by the wind left her arms and bosom exposed. But the effects of the spirit in her veins prevented any sense of cold, though it was a bitter night.

Once or twice, as she toiled up the hill, she gave a loud sudden sob.

'Oh my God!' she said to herself. 'My God!'

When she was half way up she met a neighbour.

'Have yer seen Isaac?' Bessie asked her, panting.

'Ee's at the Club, arn't 'ee?' said the woman. 'Well, they won't be up yet. Jim tolt me as Muster Perris'—Muster Perris was the vicar of Clinton Magna—'ad got a strange gen'leman stayin with 'im, and was goin to take him into the Club to-night to speak to 'em. 'Ee's a bishop, they ses—someun from furrin parts.'

Bessie threw her good-night and climbed on.

When she reached the cottage the lamp was flaming on the table and the fire was bright. Her lame boy had done all she had told him, and her miserable heart softened. She hurriedly put out some food for Isaac. Then she lit a candle and went up to look at the children. They were all asleep in the room to the right of the stairs—the two little boys in one bed,

the two little girls in the other, each pair huddled together against the cold, like dormice in a nest. Then she looked, conscience-stricken, at the untidiness of the room. She had bought the children a wonderful number of new clothes lately, and the family being quite unused to such abundance, there was no place to keep them in. A new frock was flung down in a corner just as it had been taken off; the kitten was sleeping on Arthur's last new jacket; a smart hat with a bunch of poppies in it was lying about the floor; and under the iron beds could be seen a confusion of dusty boots, new and old. The children were naturally reckless like their mother, and they had been getting used to new things. What excited them now, more than the acquisitions themselves, was that their mother had strictly forbidden them ever to show any of their new clothes to their father. If they did, she would beat them well, she said. That they understood; and life was thereby enriched, not only by new clothes but by a number of new emotions and terrors.

If Bessie noted the state of the room, she made no attempt to mend it. She smoothed back the hair from the boys' foreheads with a violent, shaky hand, and kissed them all, especially Arthur. Then she went out and closed the door behind her.

Outside she stood a moment on the tiny landing—listening. Not a sound; but the cottage walls were thin. If anyone came along the lane with heavy boots she must hear them. Very like he would be half an hour yet.

She ran down the stairs and shut the door at the bottom of them, opening into the kitchen. It had no key or she would have locked it; and in her agitation, her state of clouded brain, she forgot the outer door altogether. Hurrying up again, she sat down on the topmost step, putting her candle on the boards beside her. The cupboard at the stair-head where John had left his money was close to her left hand.

As she sank into the attitude of rest, her first instinct was to cry and bemoan herself. Deep in her woman's being great floods of tears were rising, and would fain have spent themselves. But she fought them down, rapidly passing instead into a state of cold terror—terror of Isaac's step—terror of discovery—of the man in the public-house.

There was a mousehole in the skirting of the stairs close to the cupboard. She slipped in a finger, felt along an empty space behind, and drew out a key.

It turned easily in the cupboard lock and the two boxes stood revealed, standing apparently just as they stood when John left them. In hot haste Bessie dragged the treasure-box from under the other, starting at every sound in the process, at the thud the old wooden trunk made on the floor of the cupboard as its supporter was withdrawn, at the rustle of her own dress. All the boldness she had shown at the 'Spotted Deer' had vanished. She was now the mere trembling and guilty woman.

The lock on Bolderfield's box had been forced long before; it opened to her hand. A heap of sovereigns and half-sovereigns lay on one side, divided by a wooden partition from the few silver coins, crowns and half-crowns, still lying on the other. She counted both the gold and silver, losing her reckoning again and again, because of the sudden anguish of listening that would overtake her.

Thirty-six pounds on the one side, not much more than thirty shillings on the other. When John left it there had been fifty-one pounds in gold, and rather more than twenty pounds in silver, most of it in half-crowns. Ah! she knew the figures well.

Did that man who had spoken to the landlord in the public house suspect? How strange they had all looked! What a silly fool she had been to change so much of the silver, instead of sticking to the gold! Yet she had thought the gold would be noticed more.

When was old John coming back? He had written once from Frampton to say that he was 'laid up bad with the rheumatics,' and was probably going into the Frampton Infirmary. That was in November. Since then nothing had been heard of him. John was no scholar. What if he died without coming back? There would be no trouble then, except—except with Isaac.

Her mind suddenly filled with wild visions,—of herself marched through the village by Watson, as she had once seen him march a poacher who had mauled one of Mr. Forrest's keepers—of the towering walls of Frampton jail—of a visible physical shame which would kill her—drive her mad. If, indeed, Isaac did not kill her before anyone but he knew! He had been that cross and glum all these last weeks—never a bit of talk hardly—always snapping at her and the children. Yet he had never said a word to her about the drink—nor about the things she had bought. As to the 'things' and the bills, she believed that he knew nothing—had noticed nothing. At home he was always smoking, sitting silent, with dim eyes, like a man in a dream—

or reading his father's old books, 'good books,' which filled Bessie with a sense of dreariness unspeakable—or pondering his weekly paper.

But she believed he had begun to notice the drink. Drinking was universal in Clinton, though there was not much drunkenness. Teetotalers were unknown, and Isaac himself drank his beer freely, and a glass of spirits, like anybody else on occasion. She had been used for years to fetch his beer from the public, and she had been careful. But there were signs——

Oh! if she could only think of some way of putting it back—this thirty odd pounds. She held her head between her hands, thinking and thinking. Couldn't that little lawyer man to whom she went every month at Bedford, to fetch her legacy money—couldn't he lend it her, and keep her money till it was paid? She could make up a story, and give him something for himself to induce him to hold his tongue. She had thought of this often before, but never so urgently as now. She would take the carrier's cart to Bedford next day, while Isaac was at work, and try.

Yet all the time despair was at her heart. So hard to undo! Yet how easy it had been to take and to spend. She thought of that day in September, when she had got the news of her legacy—six shillings a week from an old aunt—her father's aunt, whose very existence she had forgotten. The wild delight of it! Isaac got sixteen shillings a week in wages—here was nearly half as much again. She was warned that it would come to an end in two years. But none the less it seemed to her a fortune—and all her life, before it came, mere hard pinching and endurance. She had always been one to spend where she could. Old John had often rated her for it. So had Isaac. But that was his money. This was hers, and he who, for religious reasons, had never made friends with or thought well of any of her family, instinctively disliked the money which had come from them, and made few inquiries into the spending of it.

Oh! the joy of those first visits to Frampton, when all the shops had seemed to be there for her, and she their natural mistress! How ready people had been to trust her in the village! How tempting it had been to brag and make a mystery! That old skinfint, Mrs. Moulsey, at 'the shop,' she had been all sugar and sweets *then*.

And a few weeks later—six, seven weeks later—about the beginning of October, these halcyon days had all come to an end.

She owed what she could not pay—people had ceased to smile upon her—she was harassed, excited, worried out of her life.

Old familiar wonder of such a temperament! How can it be so easy to spend, so delightful to promise, and so unreasonably, so unjustly difficult, to pay?

She began to be mortally afraid of Isaac—of the effect of disclosures. One night she was alone in the cottage, almost beside herself under the pressure of one or two claims she could not meet—one claim especially, that of a little jeweller, from whom she had bought a gold ring and a brooch at Frampton—when the thought of John's hoard swept upon her—clutched her like something living and tyrannical, not to be shaken off.

It struck her all in an instant that there was another cupboard in the little parlour, exactly like that on the stairs. The lower cupboard had a key—what if it fitted?

The Devil must have been eager and active that night, for the key turned in the lock with a smoothness that made honesty impossible, almost foolish. And the old, weak lock on the box itself—why, a chisel had soon made an end of that! Only five minutes—it had been so quick—there had been no trouble. God had made no sign at all.

Since! All the village smiles—the village flatteries recovered—an orgie of power and pleasure—new passions and excitements—above all, the rising passion of drink, sweeping in storms through a weak nature that alternately opened to them and shuddered at them. And through everything the steadily dribbling away of the hoard—the astonishing ease and rapidity with which the coins—gold or silver—had flowed through her hands! How could one spend so much in meat and dress, in beer and gin, in giving other people beer and gin? How was it possible? She sat lost in miserable thoughts, a mist round her. . . .

'Wal I niver!' said a low, astonished voice at the foot of the stairs.

Bessie rose to her feet with a shriek, the heart stopping in her breast. The door below was ajar, and through the opening peered a face—the vicious, drunken face of her husband's eldest son, Timothy Costrell.

The man below cast one more look of amazement at the woman standing on the top stair, at the candle behind her, at the open box. Then an idea struck him: he sprang up the stairs at a bound.

'By gosh!' he said, looking down at the gold and silver. '*By gosh!*' Bessie tried to thrust him back. 'What are you here for?' she asked fiercely, her trembling lips the colour of the white-washed wall behind. 'You get off at onst, or I'll call yer father.'

He pushed her contemptuously aside. The swish of her dress caught the candle, and by good fortune put it out, or she would have been in a blaze. Now there was only the light from the paraffin lamp in the kitchen below striking upwards through the open door.

She fell against the doorway of her bedroom, panting and breathless, watching him.

He seated himself in her place, and stooped to look at the box. On the inside of the lid was pasted a discoloured piece of paper, and on the paper was written, in a round, laborious hand, the name, 'John Bolderfield.'

'My blazes!' he said slowly, his bloodshot eyes opening wider than ever. 'It's old John's money! So yo've been after it, eh?'

He turned to her with a grin, one hand on the box. He had been tramping for more than three months, during which time they had heard nothing of him. His filthy clothes scarcely hung together. His cheeks were hollow and wolfish. From the whole man there rose a sort of exhalation of sodden vice. Bessie had seen him drunken and out at elbows before, but never so much of the beast as this.

However, by this time she had somewhat recovered herself, and, approaching him, she stooped and tried to shut the box.

'You take yourself off,' she said, desperately, pushing him with her fist. 'That money's no business o' yourn. It's John's, an he's comin back directly. He gave it us to look after, an I wor countin it. March!—there's your father comin!'

And with all her force she endeavoured to wrench his hand away. He tore it from her, and hit out at her backwards—a blow that sent her reeling against the wall.

'Yo take yer meddlin fist out o' that!' he said. 'Father ain't coming, and if he wor, I 'spect I could manage the two on yer—*Keowntin* it—' he mimicked her. 'Oh! yer a precious innercent, ain't yer? But I know all about yer. Bless yer, I've been in at the "Spotted Deer" to-night, and there worn't nothin else talked of but yo and yor goin's on. There won't be a tongue in the place to-morrow that won't be a-waggin about

yer—yur a public charickter, yo are—they'll be sendin the reporters down on yer for a hinterview. "Where the devil do she get the money?" they says.'

He threw his curly head back and laughed till his sides shook.

'Lor, I didn't think I wor going to know quite so soon! An sich queer 'arf-crowns, they ses, as she keeps a-changin. Jarge somethin—an old cove in a wig. An 'ere they is, I'll be blowed, —some on 'em. Well, yer a nice 'un, yer are!'

He stared her up and down with a kind of admiration.

Bessie began to cry feebly—the crying of a lost soul.

'Tim, if yer'll go away an hold yer tongue, I'll give yer five o' them suverins, and not tell yer father nothin.'

'Five on 'em?' he said, grinning. 'Five on 'em, eh?'

And dipping his hands into the box he began deliberately shovelling the whole hoard into his trousers and waistcoat pockets.

Bessie flung herself upon him. He gave her one businesslike blow which knocked her down against the bedroom door. The door yielded to her fall, and she lay there half stunned, the blood dripping from her temple.

'Noa, I'll not take 'em all,' he said, not even troubling to look where she had fallen. 'That 'ud be playing it rayther too low down on old John. I'll leave 'im two—jest two—for luck.'

He buttoned up his coat tightly, then turned to throw a last glance at Bessie. He had always disliked his father's second wife, and his sense of triumph was boundless.

'Oh! yer not hurt,' he said; 'yer shammin. I advise yer to look sharp with shuttin up. Father'll be up the hill in two or three minutes now. Sorry I can't 'elp yer, now yer've set me up so comfortabul. Bye-bye!'

He ran down the stairs. She, as her senses revived, heard him open the back-door, cross the little garden, and jump the hedge at the end of it.

Then she lay absolutely motionless, till suddenly there struck on her ear the distant sound of heavy steps. They roused her like a goad. She dragged herself to her feet, shut the box, had just time to throw it into the cupboard and lock the door, when she heard her husband walk into the kitchen. She crept into her own room, threw herself on the bed, and wrapped her head and eyes in an old shawl, shivering so that the mattresses shook.

'Bessie, where are yer?'

She did not answer. He made a sound of astonishment, and, finding no candle, took the lamp and mounted the stairs. They were covered with traces of muddy snow, and at the top he stooped to examine a spot upon the boards. It was blood; and his heart thumped in his breast.

‘Bessie, whatever is the matter?’

For by this time he had perceived her on the bed. He put down the lamp and came to the bedside to look at her.

‘I’ve ’ad a fall,’ she said, faintly. ‘I tripped up over my skirt as I wor comin up to look at Arthur. My head’s all bleedin. Get me some water from over there.’

His countenance fell sadly. But he got the water, exclaiming when he saw the wound.

He bathed it clumsily, then tied a bit of rag round it, and made her head easy with the pillow. She did not speak, and he sat on beside her, looking at her pale face, and torn, as the silent minutes passed, between conflicting impulses. He had just passed an hour listening to a good man’s plain narrative of a life spent for Christ, amid fever-swamps, and human beings more deadly still. The Vicar’s friend was a missionary bishop, and a High Churchman; Isaac, as a staunch Dissenter by conviction and inheritance, thought ill both of bishops and Ritualists. Nevertheless he had been touched; he had been fired. Deep, though often perplexed instincts in his own heart had responded to the spiritual passion of the speaker. The religious atmosphere had stolen about him, melting and subduing.

And the first effect of it had been to quicken suddenly his domestic conscience; to make him think painfully of Bessie and the children as he climbed the hill. Was his wife going the way of his son? And he, sitting day after day like a dumb dog, instead of striving with her!

He made up his mind hurriedly. ‘Bessie,’ he said, stooping to her and speaking in a strange voice, ‘Bessie, had yer been to Dawson’s?’

Dawson was the landlord of the ‘Spotted Deer.’

Bessie was long in answering. At last she said, almost inaudibly,

‘Yes.’

She fully understood what he had meant by the question, and she wondered whether he would fall into one of his rages and beat her.

Instead his hand sought clumsily for hers.

'Bessie, yer shouldn't; yer mustn't do it no more; it'll make a bad woman of yer. I know as I'm not good to live with; I don't make things pleasant to yer; but I've been thinkin; I'll try if yo'll try.'

Bessie burst into tears. It seemed as though her life were breaking within her. Never since their early married days had he spoken to her like this. And she was in such piteous need of comfort; of some strong hand to help her out of the black pit in which she lay. The wild impulse crossed her to sit up and tell him—to throw it all on Timothy, to show him the cupboard and the box. Should she tell him; brave it all now that he was like this? Between them they might find a way—make it good.

Then the thought of the man in the public-house, of the half-crowns, a host of confused and guilty memories, swept upon her. How could she ever get herself out of it? Her heart beat so that it seemed a live creature strangling and silencing her. She was still fighting with her tears and her terror when she heard Isaac say:

'I know yer 'll try, and I'll help yer. I'll be a better husband to yer, I swear I will. Give us a kiss, old woman.'

She turned her face, sobbing, and he kissed her cheek.

Then she heard him say in another tone:

'An I got a bit o' news down at the club as will liven yer up. Parkinson was there; just come over from Frampton to see his mother; an he says John will be here to-morrer or next day. 'Ee seed him yesterday—pulled down dreadful—quite the old man,' ee says. An John told him as he was comin 'ome directly to live comfortable.'

Bessie drew her shawl over her head.

'To-morrer, did yer say?' she asked in a whisper.

'Mos like. Now you go to sleep; I'll put out the lamp.'

But all night long Bessie lay wide awake in torment, her soul hardening within her, little by little.

(To be continued.)

THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR.

[The following letter, which was written by the late Captain Benjamin Clement, then a lieutenant on the *Tonnant*, describes the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805, as seen by one engaged in it.

The letter was written shortly after the battle to the writer's father, the late Mr. Thomas Clement, and has remained in the hands of the family ever since. The document is of peculiar interest as giving a wording different from that usually received of Nelson's famous message to his fleet, and as entirely ignoring Nelson's death. The personal adventure described by the writer is mentioned in James's '*Naval History*,' vol. iv. p. 50, where, after describing the surrender of the *Algéciras* and the *San Juan*, the author corroborates the account of Lieutenant Clement's escape in boarding the Spanish vessel given in the letter, using almost the same words as are in the letter. The historian adds that 'by this means a brave young officer, who had been in two or three of the general actions of the preceding war, was saved to his country.']

Tonnant at the Back of the Isle of White.

30th. of November 1805.

MY DEAR FATHER

I with pleasure sit down to give you a few particulars of the late glorious Action—Lord Nelson had Information that the Enemy intended comming to Sea, and that they should not know our Force we kept off cape St. Mary's we were reinforced by six sail of the line from England—Adm^l Lewis was detached up the Mediterranean with six ships of the line the Enemy knew Adm^l Lewis had gone through the Streights and not knowing we were reinfoced judged it a most convenient opportunity of meeting us, altho' we kept at so convenient or rather great distance yet we kept up a chain of communication by ships being in sight of one another, by signal all the way to cadiz—On the nineteenth of October the Sig^l was made the Enemy was getting underweigh, we Imediately stood to the Southward to prevent them passing the gut—on the 20th. dark cloudy weather with Rain, the signal for 16 of the Enemy being at sea, heavy squalls with thick Rain—in the evening the Sig^l for 30 of the Enemy's ships, stood to the Southward and Westward, that they should not see us, altho' our look out ships saw them, during the night signals continually made by the look out ships to let us know the Enemy's Situation, At length day light opened to our view, the Enemy's Fleet, a most glorious sight for an English Fleet, having them also to Leeward; the Sig^l Imediately for a general Chace, Moderate breezes, the

enemy forming a line of battle ahead to wait our attack, the English fleet composed of 27 ships of the line 3 frigates the combined fleets 33 of the line 2 frigates, we went down in no order, but every Man to take his Bird. At 11.30 the sig^l was made '*England expects every individual will do his duty,*' at 12 the Enemy's ships opened a most Tremendous fire on the Royal sovereign, which she returned, in a style that did honour to old England, then on the Belleisle, then on the Tonnant—the Mars seconded us and at this moment Lord Nelson's line began, but from smoke Guns etc. from this moment all became confusion, except with in a few hundred yards at Intervals—they cut us up a good deal untill we got our Broadside to bear on a Spanish Ship in breacking the line, when we gave her such a Murdering broadside that she did not return a gun for some Minutes and a very few afterwards—The French Algisuras (Adm^l Magor) was the ship astern of the ship we had saluted, she filled her Main Top sail and shot up to Rake us, we put our helm up and tumbled on board of her and fought it out—the fire from both ships was Tremendous, one or the other must give way, at this critical time a spanish and french ship crossed our bow, being stationed on the Forecastle and seeing the situation we were in, I went aft to inform Captain Tyler, when I found he had been carried below wounded; the first Lieut became Captain—he said he had sent for the officers to consult what was best to be done, and at that moment, the 2d. Lt came up when we three agreed to keep the boarders aft, and turn to on those gentlemen on the Bow—they kept up a heavy fire on us for sometime and we accomadating them with as good as they sent, when an English ship took the French one off from us—at this moment the Spanish ship found our fire too heavy for her and the Ship on board of us on the Quarter, struck, when Lt Bennett with 60 Men, stepped on board from our ship and took possession; she proved to be the Algisuras of 74 guns Adm^l Magor who was killed in the Action, as also 3 Lieutenants of her, the Captain very badly wounded, she had 850 Men when she began, and 300 Killed and wounded, she Attempted to board us several times, during this time we were hard at it on the Spanish Ship, when at last down came her colours, I hailed him, and asked him if he had struck, when he said yes, I came aft and Informed the first Lieut, when he ordered me to board her, we had no boat but what was shot, but he told me I must try; so I went away in the Jolly Boat with 2 Men, and had not got above a quarter of the way, when the

boat swampt—I cannot swim, but the 2 Men that were with me could, one a Black Man, the other a Quarter Master, he was the last Man in her, when a shot struck her and knocked her Quarter off, and she turned bottom up—Macnamara, the black Man, staid by me on one side and Maclay the Quarter Master on the other, untill I got hold of the Jolly Boats fall, that was hanging over-board—I got my leg between the fall and as the ship lifted by the sea so was I, and as she descended, I was ducked; I found myself weak and thought I was not long for this world, Macnamara swam to the ship, and got a Rope and to me again, and made it fast under my arm's, when I swang off, and was hauled into the stern port; in a short time I felt better and the anxiety of the time roused me, and I soon returned to my Quarters, when some ship had taken possession of the Spanish Ship; she proved to be the St. Juan Nepomuceno of 74 guns, 900 Men, and had 400 Killed and wounded in the Action. At this time Adm^l Dunonwoir with 4 Sail of the line was making off, when we opened a heavy an well directed fire on them they fired on their own ships, as they went along that were in our possession—found 16 in our possession—one blew up and one sunk, and eleven got into Cadiz—the next Morning they came out to recapture¹ *as many* as they could when there came on a heavy gale *during which* 11 was lost; the St. Anna and Algisuras *were disabled and* drifted so near Cadiz that they rose on our *port and* they took them in; they both had all their Masts *carried away*. We have since got our people from cadiz *were by this time* so compleat a wreck that the Spartiate was *obliged* to take us in tow, our Rudder being very badly shot. *Our* Top Mast and Main yard and Top sail yards being *also* shot *away* and our lower Mast very badly wounded as *also every* remaining spar—in this state we experienced as heavy a gale has ever I was in, the Spartiate parted the tow Rope, and to tell you the truth I thought we never should weather the land, all our prizes were lost in the Gale except 4, and what is most astonishing not one English ship was lost, and out of the 9 that remain in Cadiz only 4 are worth repair and only three with Masts standing—On the 28th. we weathered Cape Trafalgar and got to Gibraltar, and got jury Masts to come home, we are ordered to portsmouth to Refit when I shall endeavour to get leave of absence, and shall be able to Give you a

¹ The words in italics on this page are conjectural, the letter having evidently been torn at this point in breaking the seal.

better account than I can here—the Loss has been dreadful on the Enemy as all their Men were lost in the wrecks—we spoke a vessel this morning which says S^r Ric^h Strachen has taken Dunonwoir with the other 4—twenty four out of 33 is tolerable good work—and only 4 of the 9 worth Repair.—we had 26 killed and 50 wounded—Captain Tyler was shot through the thigh early in the action by a Muskett Ball but the Bone is not hurt and he will soon Recover—one little Midshipman by the Name of Brown killed, the only Officer in the ship and another instance is not known where not one of the ward room officers was hurt, in a ship so warmly engaged, and the number of killed and wounded so great—I have Rec^d but 2 letters since May last but I hope you have Rec^d mine, and trust through your goodness and Interest to be soon promoted—we come home in company with the Temeraire Royal sovereign Colossus and Leviathan, we are all lame Ducks but the Leviathan who tows the Sovereign—we sent most of the Spanish prisoners on shore at Algisuras and by a mistake some french (*of Adm^l Knights the mistake*) and we have 200 on board here and the other ships of the squadron in proportion—Our Mess is full of Officers and our stern is so compleatly beat that it is obliged to be plancked up and only 2 little peepholes which makes it unpleasant—I have 2 Gibraltar Newspapers which I will enclose in another letter begging to be kindly remembered to my Dearest Mother Brothers and Sisters and all at home I am my Dearest Father your Affectionate Son,

BENJⁿ CLEMENT.

I hope you got a few lines I wrote by an unexpected opportunity but if there had been hours at that time I could not have said more.

The Royal Sovereign and Laviathan went into Plymouth yesterday.

THOMAS CLEMENT Esq^r
Alton
Hants

ST. NICHOLAS IN ENGLAND.

WHETHER you know it or not, you are now, or were at one time, under the special protection of the benign St. Nicholas. He is, or was, your patron saint. For everybody has at some time been what Mr. Chadband called 'a soaring human boy,' with the trifling exception of that fraction of everybody which is or has been a soaring human girl. And St. Nicholas is the chosen protector of childhood, irrespective of sex or colour or country. Indeed, the good Bishop of Myra has probably more votaries of his own to look after than all the rest of the saints in the calendar put together. He is an overworked patron. St. George, to be sure, has to take care of Englishmen, which is a heavy duty, even when supplemented by so many British Consuls in foreign parts; and his famous cry of 'St. George for England!' still recalls to us the memory of his half-forgotten protective function. St. James of Compostella, again, does the same for Spaniards; while St. Thomas the Apostle guards the rights of the Portuguese from East Africa to the Andes. But St. Nicholas is a far busier, because a more impartial and international saint; he disdains to be bound by geographical or political distinctions. Universal childhood the wide world over engages his constant and serious attention. He acts as a sort of superior Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a canonised and glorified variant on Mr. Benjamin Waugh of London. But being an active saint, as if that were not enough to keep him well employed, he also occupies his spare moments with being the patron of sailors, of merchants, of travellers, and of prisoners; besides taking rank as the special guardian of Russia, of Venice, of Bari, and of Freiberg. It will be admitted at once that he has his work cut out for him.

And yet St. Nicholas is not proud. There is, indeed, no more democratic figure in the Christian calendar. No saint has been so universally popular among the people. As Mrs. Jameson well says, 'While knighthood had its St. George, serfhood had its St. Nicholas.' In the Middle Ages he was the *bourgeois* saint of the peaceable citizen, the hard-worked craftsman, the merchant assailed by feudal exaction, the mariner who battled with the stormy ocean. Everywhere and emphatically he is still the

protector of the weak against the strong, of the child against the adult, of the slave against the master, of the peaceable against the warlike.

Now, I am not going to deal at present with the history of St. Nicholas in the world at large, or with the settlements he has effected in foreign countries. I cannot pretend to follow him over Europe. I am only going to treat in the present paper of the marks he has left upon this realm of England, and of the visible tokens of his presence still to be found among us. Though the Reformation swept him so utterly away that only his name now remains in the calendar (on the sixth of December), it is astonishing how many remnants of his former popularity may still be gleaned in our midst by a diligent inquirer.

It would be impossible, however, not to say one word at the outset about the actual Nicholas of Myra himself, who has been promoted in time to such multifarious functions. A very small kernel of historical truth forms the core of a mighty accretion of legends. All that is known with any certainty of Nicholas is the bare fact that he lived in Asia Minor, somewhere about the beginning of the fourth century. He was Bishop of Myra, a Lycian sea-coast town; venerable (of course) for his piety and benevolence; and he was revered in the East at least as early as the sixth century. In the Greek Church he takes rank immediately after the five great Fathers; and under the name of St. Nicholas of Myra he is esteemed as patron saint of by far the largest body of Orthodox Greeks—the Russian Empire. Czar Nicholas, indeed, is but one out of his many namesakes. As early as the year 560, Justinian dedicated a church in Constantinople to the renowned bishop. In the West, where, for a reason which I will hereafter mention, he is more commonly known as St. Nicholas of Bari, he was acclimatised for good in the eleventh century. His vogue in the North began with the twelfth, but extended so rapidly that by the Reformation he probably possessed in England alone more churches and chapels dedicated in his honour than any other holy personage.

For reasons of space I will not detail to you at full the acts of St. Nicholas—how the future patron of all good children stood up in his bath on the day he was born, with his hands joined in thanksgiving that Heaven had been pleased to bring him into the world; how every Wednesday and Friday in the first months of his life he religiously fasted from the natural sustenance of infant

humanity; how, when he grew up, he threw three purses of gold into a poor nobleman's window, in order to portion his three starving daughters; how, in sailing to the Holy Land, he was attacked by a storm, and how he rebuked that storm with fatherly exhortation so that it ceased immediately; how he was designated by a vision as Bishop of Myra, and how in the pursuance of his episcopate he performed many miracles too numerous to relate, but varying from the sublime to the grotesque and the ridiculous. Most of these miracles, however, were interpositions in favour of mariners in distress or of innocent children—particularly in the case of the wicked man who murdered and salted little boys and girls, and had even the audacity to serve up their limbs before the horrified bishop. I need hardly remark that when Nicholas saw them, he detected at once this gross and flagrant case of adulteration of food, and going to the tub where the remains of the three children were salted down, he made the sign of the cross above them, when straightway the children rose up again, safe and sound, as if nothing had happened. Nicholas died on the sixth of December, 326, which day has ever since been kept as his festival. He was sumptuously buried with all due rites in a magnificent church in the city of Myra.

But, as a matter of course, he was not allowed to rest there. Being a beneficent saint, much adored by the sailor, the merchant, and the traveller, the possession of his relics was eagerly coveted by many nations. Pilgrims from every country resorted to the shrine in the city of Myra. Several of them made various attempts to carry off the veritable body of the saint, by force or fraud, as the Venetians had carried off the body of St. Mark from Alexandria to Venice. But the infidel was too much for them. At last, in the year 1084, certain merchants of Bari, an Apulian town on the Adriatic coast of Italy, fired with what an American writer has described as 'religious enterprise,' determined to possess themselves of the veritable relics. They landed at Myra, and found the country desolated by Saracens, while three monks alone mounted guard over St. Nicholas. The men of Bari, much rejoiced, seized the body at once, and carried it off to their own city. A magnificent church was built over the remains, and duly consecrated by Pope Urban II. It is a pillared basilica in the Romanesque style, and is locally known as San Nicôla, with the accent strongly placed on the second syllable. Under the altar in the crypt lie the bones of the saint, exuding a miraculous and

sweet-scented fluid, the 'Manna di Bari,' highly prized by the pilgrims who flock to the festival. Hence the veneration of 'St. Nicholas of Bari' extended rapidly over Western Europe.

Naturally, the good saint transferred his affections at once from his native Myra to these new quarters; for, strange to say, no saint seems ever to resent such forcible translation. Indeed, a good story is told in this connection of Sir Richard Burton, who when travelling in Afghanistan had adopted the disguise of a Mahomedan fakir. At one village where he stopped, he played his part so well that the people formed a high idea of their visitor's sanctity. He was congratulating himself, indeed, on the impression he had produced, when one night, to his immense surprise, the elders of the village came to him in private and earnestly advised him to go away at once. Burton asked in astonishment whether the people did not like him, and was answered, Oh, yes; that was just the trouble. They were all enchanted with his remarkable holiness; and, considering what a splendid thing it would be to possess the relics of so good a man, whose tomb would draw whole crowds of pilgrims, they were debating with themselves whether or not it would be wise to kill him. That is the true spirit of relic-hunting all the world over. The mere physical possession of the great man's remains seems to bring him nearer, and to give you, as it were, some magical power over him; the question whether you acquired them by fair means or foul is usually considered of quite secondary importance.

It is the prerogative of saints, however, to have at least two bodies. While the people of Bari rejoice in the possession of the original and only genuine St. Nicholas, the people of Venice are proud for their part to show you a duplicate. They carried it off from Myra in the year 1100, and keep it in the church of San Niccolò di Lido, on the bank of sand that bounds the lagoon to eastward. Pilgrimages are undertaken to both shrines; but pious Venetians who have made a vow sometimes give the saint of Bari the benefit of the doubt by repeating at his tomb the devotions they have already paid at the church on the Lido. I have never heard of a man of Bari returning the compliment.

The fame of a holy man so intimately connected with two great trading towns of the Middle Ages was sure to spread in time to all the ports of Europe. Indeed, St. Nicholas is essentially a seafarer's saint, and both at Bari and Venice his church stands close to the mouth of the harbour. He travelled with the sailors from haven

to haven. Venetian crews used to land at San Niccolò as they passed outward to ask a blessing on their voyage, and as they passed inward to give thanks for their safe return. Tales of marvellous escape from shipwreck by the intercession of St. Nicholas diffused his fame in all the shipping centres. Sometimes, like Castor and Pollux, whom he practically replaced, he visibly appeared before the eyes of his votaries, and when he did so, the storm then raging would cease immediately. You may see him so in the very rude and ancient picture by Margaritone of Arezzo, in the National Gallery. In the picturesque and poetical legend of the three saints and the fisherman, again, commemorated in two celebrated paintings at Venice by Giorgione and Paris Bordone, it is St. Nicholas of the Lido who stills the tempest. Hence it is no wonder that many churches in seafaring towns are dedicated to St. Nicholas; they abound in all the harbours and fishing villages of our southern counties, and 376 dedications in his honour still exist in Britain.

The largest parish church in England is St. Nicholas's at Yarmouth. (But there is another largest parish church at Hull; and it would ill become me to deny that each of the two is bigger than its rival.) Now Yarmouth, of course, has from a very early time been an important port and fishing station. The original church there was built by Bishop Herbert de Losinga, and consecrated in 1119: the existing building dates from 1190. It is nearly as big as Ripon or Rochester Cathedral, and it looks bigger than it is owing to its lowness. Other churches dedicated to the seaman's saint occur elsewhere abundantly in coastwise towns of East Anglia. King's Lynn, for example, has a St. Nicholas's chapel, built and dedicated (in its original form) almost as early as the church at Yarmouth; and Lynn was, of course, an important place in the Middle Ages.

The old church at Brighton—the original parish church of the fishing village—which stands half-way up the hill above the Steyne valley, is also a St. Nicholas. The ancient fisher-hamlet of Brighthelmstone must always have been much exposed both to the king's enemies and the inroads of the sea; and Macaulay has immortalised in his most famous chapter the episode of its destruction by the great storms of the seventeenth century. No wonder, then, that its trembling inhabitants were glad to put themselves under the potent protection of the seafarer's bishop, to whom the little flint-built perpendicular church on the wind-swept

hill is still dedicated. Pevensey, where the Conqueror landed, has likewise a St. Nicholas; and indeed there is some reason to believe that the Normans at large had a special reverence for the great saint of Apulia.

St. Nicholas-at-Wade, near Minster in Thanet, overlooks that navigable channel of the Wantsum, which once divided the isle from the mainland, and up which ships from the Continent sailed to London, so as to avoid the dangerous weathering of the North Foreland. It was built by the monks of Reculver, above the Roman Vada, whose name it perpetuates; and the monks themselves had charge of the channel still marked by the towers of their famous church, a sea-mark for sailors.

All round the English coast such churches of St. Nicholas are extremely common; not to weary the reader with them, I will mention two other well-known cases only. The little craggy islet which rises so abruptly in the harbour of Plymouth is known as Drake's or St. Nicholas's Island. But it was St. Nicholas's, of course, long before it was Drake's; and a chapel to the saint of Bari and of the Lido long stood as a beacon upon its rocky summit. The nestling church at Sidmouth in Devon also owns allegiance to St. Nicholas. At other places, where we find side-chapels in churches dedicated to the maritime saint, we may be pretty sure they were built and maintained at the cost of the seafaring or mercantile community. Such are the chapel of St. Nicholas in Exeter Cathedral; for Exeter was a port in the Middle Ages; and the chapel of St. Nicholas in the old church of Winchelsea, where the sturdy Admiral of the Cinque Ports, one Gervase Alard, still lies cross-legged in effigy on a noble monument. As for London, that, of course, has its St. Nicholas Olave and its St. Nicholas Cole-Abbey, as though one church alone were not quite enough for a great trading town to dedicate to the peaceable patron saint of the traders. Inland churches in his honour are rarer: when they occur, as at Guildford, and again at Leatherhead, it is generally close to a navigable river.

In all these cases St. Nicholas appears before us, not as the patron saint of childhood, but as the protector of the sailor, the merchant, and the traveller. In other cases, however, his connection with boys, and especially with schoolboys, is his distinguishing feature. Thus, the reign of the Boy Bishop in our cathedral towns began on St. Nicholas's day, the sixth of December, and ended appropriately with the Massacre of the Innocents, three

days after Christmas. Meanwhile, the Boy Bishop and his young supporters celebrated all the Church services, save only mass, and even filled up ecclesiastical vacancies which occurred in the interval. This was probably the origin of Christmas holidays; and the name of St. Nicholas still clings on the Continent, but especially in Flanders and Holland, to the midwinter vacation. The children of the Low Countries know the good bishop familiarly as Santa Klaus (a childish corruption of Sant Niklaas), and are told, if they are good, he will fill their stocking on the eve of his festival with toys and sweetmeats; while, if they are naughty, he just as surely keeps a rod in pickle for them. The Dutch element in New York introduced 'Santa Claus' to the American youngster; and thence, by means of American Christmas cards and American magazines, he has been naturalised across the Atlantic once more in England. Indeed, one of the most successful American magazines for children is called *St. Nicholas*, a name which now hardly conveys any meaning at all to the vast mass of Englishmen.

In earlier days, however, Nicholas was dear to the hearts of English schoolboys. Winchester College had its Boy Bishop on St. Nicholas's day; and Eton Montem itself, most famed of school events, was a transfer of the remains of the old festival to a more genial season, after it had become altered by time into a meaningless relic. Many boys' schools through the Middle Ages were dedicated to St. Nicholas; and now, in the ends of the earth, in our own degenerate days, when saints have once more come back into fashion, the most modish fad among Anglican reformers is to call their brand-new scholastic foundations by such sham-antique names as St. Nicholas College, Lancing.

As a Christian name Nicholas positively came over with the Conqueror. He landed in the parish of St. Nicholas at Pevensey. Domesday Book contains only one Nicolas, undisfigured as yet by that intrusive aspirate which has also taken undue possession of Antony, though it has dropped out, *en revanche*, from Hadrian and from Hannah. From the Conquest on the Nicholases multiplied and were very abundant. I find the name most frequent in mediæval documents. Nicolas Breakspear was the only Englishman ever made a Pope; Nicholas Ridley was the burnt bishop; while Sir Nicholas Bacon was father of the man who, there is every reason to suppose, did *not* write 'Hamlet,' 'Macbeth,' and 'Othello.' Nicholas Udall, Master of Eton, was the author of 'Ralph Roister-Doister,' the first English comedy. In Scotland

the name got shortened into Nicol, in which form it was borne by many a 'kinless loon,' as well as by the immortal Baillie Nicol Jarvie. Pope Nicholas V., who founded the Capella Niccolina at the Vatican, gave it a fresh lease of life. But the Reformation scotched it. It lingered on awhile in some half-hearted way, and received its *coup de grâce* from the grotesque combination of Nicholas Nickleby.

Nevertheless, it was once a very common name indeed in England, as is witnessed by the answer 'N. or M.' to the familiar question, 'What is your name?' in the Catechism. The most probable explanation of this conjunction is that these mysterious letters stand for 'Nicholas and Mary,' the one being the patron saint of boys and the other of girls; so that the initials cover all possible cases. We must remember that in the Middle Ages a patron saint was a very real relation: nor is it by accident, I think, that in St. Nicholas's Chapel in Westminster Abbey we find the tombs of Nicholas, Lord Carew, and of Nicholas Bagenall.

The thirteenth century was the heroic age of surname-making in England; and as Nicolas (to give it the older and more correct form) was then a very common Christian name of men, it became the parent of not a few patronymics. It was generally curtailed in private life into Nicol or Nick; whence the frequency to this day of Nicholls and Nicholsons, of Nixes and Nixons. In earlier records these names appear as 'Henry fil. Nicholei,' or as 'William fil. Nick.' A tribe in the Punjaub worships a deity known as Nikkal Sen, who is in point of fact the redoubtable General Nicholson. Sir Harris Nicolas, the well-known antiquary, supplies us with an instance of the Christian name used as a surname by itself, after the Celtic fashion, common to Wales, Cornwall, and the Highlands of Scotland. Mr. Thomas Nicholas has written the 'Pedigree of the English People.' Nichol, Nichols, Nicholl, Nicholls, Niccholes, and Niccols are individual variants with which I have met, depending on the taste and fancy of the speller; and if some few gentlemen choose to write their patronymic Nicks or Nickson, instead of Nix or Nixon, I'm sure, for my part, I have no objection. 'Judging from our surnames,' says Bardsley, in his monumental work, 'Nick was the more favoured term. In the old song, "Joan to the Maypole," it is said:

Nan, Noll, Kate, Moll,
Brave lasses, have lads to attend 'em;
Hodge, Nick, Tom, Dick,
Brave country dancers, who can amend 'em?

But even more of our common surnames take their origin, I fancy, from the alternative diminutive Cole or Colin. Hence come many famous modern patronymics. Sir Henry Cole was the inventor of intense South Kensington. Mr. Vicat Cole discovered Surrey. Captain Cowper Coles was drowned in the *Captain*. Collins the poet and Mr. Churton Collins the poet-baiter are both alike descendants of some mediæval Nicolas, whose name was shortened by his neighbours to Colin. How frequent that pretty abbreviation must have been we can gather from the constant selection of Colin as the conventional name for the sighing shepherd in pastoral poetry, immortalised in our language by Spenser's famous piece, 'Colin Clout's come home again.' The fuller form, Collinson, still survives in connection with the furniture trade. Colet and Collett are affectionate diminutives.

Of these two chief types it seems probable that Nick is the true English form, as the Northern nations generally use the first half of a name 'for short'; while Cole and Colin must rather be considered as Norman variants, since the Southern races habitually abbreviate by using the last half of the full title. Compare Tom with Maso, from Thomas and Tommaso; compare Joe with Beppo, from Joseph and Giuseppe. Cola is the usual Italian abbreviation of Niccolò or Niccolò; it is familiar to us all in the well-known instance of Cola di Rienzi. Cola, in English, would of course become Cole, and be lengthened affectionately into Colin and Colet. Hence, St. Nicholas Cole-Abbey is really a reduplication of one and the same name. And hence, too, Dean Colet, who founded St. Paul's School, was very appropriately the descendant of a Nicolas.

St. Nicholas was furthermore popularly accounted the patron saint of thieves; not, surely, a very saintly function. That, doubtless, was why those knights of the road, whom later ages have known as *chevaliers d'industrie*, were celebrated in the Middle Ages as 'clerks of St. Nicholas.' It is said, I know not how truly, that from this locution comes our familiar phrase of Old Nick, applied to the Devil. Butler, in 'Hudibras,' derives the word from a certain famous Italian Niccolò—

Nick Macchiavel had ne'er a trick,
Though he gave the name to our Old Nick.

But this is certainly a philological error. When Dr. Murray's great dictionary reaches the letter N, we shall all be wise on this important matter. Till then it behoves us to be humbly silent.

One point more, before I dismiss St. Nicholas from heretical England to his twofold repose at Bari and the Lido. Very few figures of the Bishop of Myra have survived the Reformation and the Puritan outrages in our tight little island; but during the Middle Ages they must have abounded everywhere; and even now, here and there, in some broken-nosed and mitred figure on a cathedral front, the eye of faith can still recognise the bland and smiling features of the patron of childhood. At one time, however, the benign face must have looked down on votaries from many a sculptured niche in fifty churches of England. In order to identify these faint relics of a half-forgotten cult wherever they do occur, we must know something of the representation of St. Nicholas in art, where he has a recognised conventional type of his own such as befits so great a saint of Eastern and Western Christendom.

As a rule, St. Nicholas is figured as a bishop, resplendent in full canonicals, with mitre, cope, jewelled gloves, and crozier. He is also of a bland and benignant aspect. But as bland and benignant bishops abound in art, it is necessary to distinguish them one from another by some separate symbol, which Mark Twain profanely describes as their 'trade-marks.' St. Nicholas's trade-mark is three golden balls, or three little brown loaves, either held in his hand or laid on the ground beside him. They are understood to typify the three purses of gold which he threw in at the window to the poor nobleman's daughters. In Italy, such figures of the saint of Bari meet one at every step; but as I mean to be true to my title of 'St. Nicholas in England,' I will only allude to such few examples as are to be found at present in this kingdom. Unfortunately, I cannot point to any good surviving native instance; but in the famous Blenheim Madonna in the National Gallery, painted by Raffael in 1505 for the Ansidei family at Perugia, you will see St. Nicholas in all his glory, standing in his robes by the Madonna's side with the greatest dignity. He holds in his hand a book, as becomes the patron of studious youth: at his feet lie the three balls which make his proper emblem. The features and figure, being copied in the main from earlier models, show us just what to expect in an image of St. Nicholas. Another, but much earlier picture, also in the National Gallery, by Benvenuto da Siena, exhibits the Madonna enthroned between St. Peter and St. Nicholas. Here the saint, though gorgeously attired in episcopal vestments, is not

provided with the three gold balls which usually distinguish him; but to make up for this omission Benvenuto has kindly been at the pains to write the good bishop's name in legible letters beneath the figure; and if you look close, you will see that its adornments bear reference to certain familiar episodes in his miraculous history. Paolo Veronese's 'Consecration of St. Nicholas,' in the Venetian Room, is grandiose but unimpressive. Yet another St. Nicholas is to be found among the clustered saints of Orcagna's great altar-piece in the early Tuscan collection; he stands in the group to the spectator's right, and may easily be recognised by his conventional emblem. Diligent search in the Fra Angelico, the great Moretto, and elsewhere will disclose still less obvious examples of St. Nicholas in our national collection: I leave them to the zeal and industry of the reader.

By the aid of these figures, supplemented by observation on Italian tours, you will find it comparatively easy to discover for yourself vague traces of dilapidated Nicholases on cathedral fronts or in stained-glass windows of the Middle Ages. On the whole, it is remarkable how many lasting memories this obscure and half-historical Lycian bishop has left upon the face of England and the nomenclature of Englishmen.

THE SOWERS.

BY HENRY SETON MERRIMAN,

AUTHOR OF 'WITH EDGED TOOLS,' ETC.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNMASKED.

FOR a moment there was silence in the hovel, broken only by the wail of the dying man in the corner. Paul and Catrina faced each other—she white and suddenly breathless, he half frowning. But he did not meet her eyes.

'Paul,' she said again, with a lingering touch on the name. The sound of her voice, a rough sort of tenderness in her angry tone, made Steinmetz smile in his grim way, as a man may smile when in pain.

'Paul, what did you do this for? Why are you here? Oh, why are you in this wretched place?'

'Because you sent for me,' he answered quietly. 'Come, let us go out. I have finished here. That man will die. There is nothing more to be done for him. You must not stay in here.'

She gave a short laugh as she followed him. He had to stoop low to pass through the doorway. Then he turned and held out his hand, for fear she should trip over the high threshold. She nodded her thanks, but refused the proffered assistance.

Steinmetz lingered behind to give some last instructions, leaving Paul and Catrina to walk on down the narrow street alone. The moon was just rising—a great yellow moon such as only Russia knows—the land of the silver night.

'How long have you been doing this?' asked Catrina suddenly. She did not look towards him, but straight in front of her.

'For some years now,' he replied simply.

He lingered. He was waiting for Steinmetz, who always rose to such emergencies, who understood secrets and how to secure them when they seemed already lost. He did not quite understand what was to be done with Catrina—how she was to be silenced. She had found him out with such startling rapidity

that he felt disposed to admit her right to dictate her own terms. On a straight road this man was fearless and quick, but he had no taste or capacity for crooked ways.

Catrina walked on in silence. She was not looking at the matter from his point of view at all.

‘Of course,’ she said at length, ‘of course, Paul, I admire you for it immensely. It is just like you to go and do the thing quietly and say nothing about it; but—— Oh, you must go away from here. I—I—it is too horrible to think of your running such risks. Rather let them all die like flies than that. You mustn’t do it. You mustn’t.’

She spoke in English, hurriedly, with a little break in her voice which he did not understand.

‘With ordinary precautions the risk is very small,’ he said practically.

‘Yes. But do you take ordinary precautions? Are you sure you are all right now?’

She stopped. They were quite alone in the one silent street of the stricken village. She looked up into his face. Her hands were running over the breast of the tattered coat he wore. It was lamentably obvious even to him that she loved him. In her anxiety she either did not know what she was doing, or she did not care whether he knew or not. She merely gave way to the maternal instinct which is in the love of all women. She felt his hands; she reached up and touched his face.

‘Are you sure—are you sure you have not taken it?’ she whispered.

He walked on, almost roughly.

‘Oh, yes; quite,’ he said.

‘I will not allow you to go into any more houses in Thors. I cannot—I will not! Oh, Paul, you don’t know! If you do, I will tell them all who you are, and—and the Government will stop you.’

‘What would be the good of that?’ said Paul awkwardly. ‘Your father cared for his peasants, and was content to run risks for them. I suppose you care about them too as you go into their houses.’

‘Yes; but——’

She paused, gave a strange little reckless laugh, and was silent. Heaven forbid that we should say that she wanted him to know that she loved him. Chivalry bids us believe that women

guard the secret of their love inviolate from the world. But what was Catrina to do? Men are in the habit of forgetting that plain women are women at all. Surely some of them may be excused for reminding us at times that they also are capable of loving—that they also desire to be loved. Happy is the man who loves and is loved of a plain woman; for she will take her own lack of beauty into consideration, and give him more than most beautiful women have it in their power to give.

‘Of course,’ Catrina went on, with a sudden anger which surprised herself, ‘I cannot stop you from doing this at Osterno, though I think it is wicked; but I can prevent you from doing it here, and I certainly shall.’

Paul shrugged his shoulders.

‘As you like,’ he said. ‘I thought you cared more about the peasants.’

‘I do not care a jot about the peasants,’ she answered passionately, ‘as compared——. It is you I am thinking about, not them. I think you are selfish, and cruel to your friends.’

‘My friends have never shown that they are consumed with anxiety on my account.’

‘That is mere prevarication. Leave that to Herr Steinmetz and such men, whose business it is; you don’t do it well. Your friends may feel a lot that they do not show.’

She spoke the words shortly and sharply. Surreptitious good is so rare, that when it is found out it very naturally gets mixed up with secret evil, and the perpetrator of the hidden good deed feels guilty of a crime. Paul was in this lamentable position, which he proceeded to further aggravate by seeking to excuse himself.

‘I did it after mature consideration. I tried paying another man, but he shirked his work and showed the white feather; so Steinmetz and I concluded that there was nothing to be done but do our dirty work ourselves.’

‘Which being translated means that you do it.’

‘Pardon me. Steinmetz does his share.’

Catrina Lanovitch was essentially a woman, despite her somewhat masculine frame. She settled Karl Steinmetz’s account with a sniff of contempt.

‘And that is why you have been so fond of Osterno the last two years?’ she asked innocently.

‘Yes,’ he answered, falling into the trap.

Catrina winced. One does not wince the less because the pain is expected. The girl had the Slav instinct of self-martyrdom, which makes Russians so very different from the pleasure-loving nations of Europe.

‘Only that?’ she inquired.

Paul glanced down at her.

‘Yes,’ he answered quietly.

They walked on in silence for a few moments. Paul seemed tacitly to have given up the idea of visiting any more of the stricken cottages. They were going towards the long old house, which was called the castle more by courtesy than by right.

‘How long are you going to stay in Osterno?’ asked Catrina at length.

‘About a fortnight; I cannot stay longer. I am going to be married.’

Catrina stopped dead. She stood for a moment looking at the ground with a sort of wonder in her eyes, not pleasant to see. It was the look of one who having fallen from a great height is not quite sure whether it means death or not. Then she walked on.

‘I congratulate you,’ she said. ‘I only hope she will make you happy. She is—beautiful, I suppose?’

‘Yes,’ answered Paul simply.

The girl nodded her head.

‘What is her name?’

‘Etta Sydney Bamborough.’

Catrina had evidently never heard the name before. It conveyed nothing to her. Womanlike, she went back to her first question.

‘What is she like?’

Paul hesitated.

‘Tall, I suppose?’ suggested the stunted woman at his side.

‘Yes.’

‘And graceful?’

‘Yes.’

‘Has she—pretty hair?’ asked Catrina.

‘I think so—yes.’

‘You are not observant,’ said the girl in a singularly even and emotionless voice. ‘Perhaps you never noticed.’

‘Not particularly,’ answered Paul.

The girl raised her face. There was a painful smile twisting her lips. The moonlight fell upon her; the deep shadows beneath

the eyes made her face wear a grin. Some have seen such a grin on the face of a drowning man—a sight not to be forgotten.

‘Where does she live?’ asked Catrina. She was unaware of the thought of murder that was in her own heart. Nevertheless, the desire—indefinite, shapeless—was there to kill this woman, who was tall and beautiful, whom Paul Alexis loved.

It must be remembered in extenuation that Catrina Lanovitch had lived nearly all her life in the province of Tver. She was not modern at all. Deprived of the advantages of our enlightened society press, without the benefit of our decadent fictional literature, she had lamentably narrow views of life. She was without that deep philosophy which teaches you, mademoiselle, who read this guileless tale that nothing matters very much; that love is but a passing amusement, the plaything of an hour; that if Tom is faithless, Dick is equally amusing; while Harry’s taste in gloves and compliments is worthy of some consideration. That these things be true—that at all events the modern young lady thinks them true—is a matter of no doubt whatever. Has not the modern lady-novelist told us so? And is not the modern lady-novelist notable for her close observation of human nature, her impartial judgment of human motives, her sublime truth of delineation when she sits down to describe the thing she calls a man? By a close study of the refined feminine literature of the day the modern young lady acquires not only the knowledge of some startling social delinquencies—retailed, not as if they were quite the exception, but as if they were quite the correct thing—but also she will learn that she is human. She will realise how utterly absurd it is to attempt to be anything else. If persons in books, she will reflect, are not high-minded or pure-minded, or even clean-minded, it is useless for an ordinary person out of a book to attempt to be any of these.

This is the lesson of some new writers, and Catrina Lanovitch had, fortunately enough, lacked the opportunity of learning it.

She only knew that she loved Paul, and that what she wanted was Paul’s love to go with her all through her life. She was not self-analytical, nor subtle, nor given to thinking about her own thoughts. Perhaps she was old-fashioned enough to be romantic. If this be so, we must bear with her romance, remembering that, at all events, romance serves to elevate, while realism tends undoubtedly towards deterioration.

Catrina hated Etta Sydney Bamborough with a simple half-

barbaric hatred because she had gained the love of Paul Alexis. Etta had taken away from her the only man whom Catrina could ever love all through her life. The girl was simple enough—unsophisticated enough never to dream of compromise. She never for a moment entertained the cheap consolatory thought that in time she would get over it. She would marry somebody else, and make that compromise which is responsible for more misery in this world than ever is vice. In her great solitude, growing to womanhood as she had in the vast forest of Tver, she had learnt nearly all that she knew from the best teacher, Nature; and she held the strange, effete theory that it is wicked for a woman to marry a man she does not love, or to marry at all for any reason except love. St. Paul and a few others held like theories, but *nous avons changé tout cela*.

‘Where does she live?’ asked Catrina.

‘In London.’

They walked on in silence for a few moments. They were walking slowly, and they presently heard the footsteps of Karl Steinmetz and the servant close behind them.

‘I wonder,’ said Catrina, half to herself, ‘whether she loves you?’

It was a question, but not one that a man can answer. Paul said nothing, but walked gravely on by the side of this woman, who knew that even if Etta Sydney Bamborough should try she could never love him as she herself did.

When Karl Steinmetz joined them they were silent.

‘I suppose,’ he said in English, ‘that we may rely upon the discretion of the Fräulein Catrina?’

‘Yes,’ answered the girl; ‘you may so far as Osterno is concerned. But I would rather that you did not visit our people here. It is too dangerous—in several ways.’

‘Ah!’ murmured Steinmetz, respectfully acquiescent. He was looking straight in front of him, with an expression of countenance which was almost dense.

‘Then we must bow to your decision,’ he went on, turning towards the tall man striding along at his side.

‘Yes,’ said Paul simply.

Steinmetz smiled grimly to himself. It was one of his half-cynical theories that women hold the casting vote in all earthly matters, and when an illustration such as *this* came to prove the correctness of his deductions he only smiled. He was not by nature a cynic—only by the force of circumstances.

'Will you come to the castle?' asked the girl at length, and Steinmetz by a gesture deferred the decision to Paul.

'I think not to-night, thanks,' said the latter. 'We will take you as far as the gate.'

Catrina made no comment. When the tall gateway was reached she stopped, and they all became aware of the sound of horses' feet behind them.

'What is this?' asked Catrina.

'Only the Starosta bringing our horses,' replied Steinmetz. 'He has discovered nothing.'

Catrina nodded and held out her hand.

'Good-night,' she said, rather coldly. 'Your secret is safe with me.'

'Set a thief to catch a thief,' reflected Steinmetz. He said nothing, however, when he shook hands.

They mounted their horses and rode back the way they had come. For half an hour no one spoke. Then Paul broke the silence. He only said one word:

'D——n.'

'Yes,' returned Steinmetz quietly. 'Charity is a dangerous plaything.'

CHAPTER XIV.

A WIRE-PULLER.

THE Palace of Industry—where, with a fine sense of the fitness of the name, the Parisians amuse themselves—was in a blaze of electric light and fashion. The occasion was the Concours Hippique, an ultra-equine *fête*, where the lovers of the friend of man and such persons as are fitted by an ungenerous fate with limbs suitable to horsey clothes meet and bow. In France, as in a neighbouring land (less sunny), horsiness is the last refuge of the diminutive. It is your small man who is ever the horsiest in his outward appearance, just as it is your very plain young person who is keenest at the Sunday-school class.

When a Frenchman is horsey he never runs the risk of being mistaken for a groom or a jockey, as do his turfy compeers in England. His costume is so exaggeratedly suggestive of the stable and the horse as to leave no doubt whatever that he is an amateur of the most pronounced type. His collar is so white and stiff and

portentous as to make it impossible for him to tighten up his own girths. His breeches are so breechy about the knee as to render an ascent to the saddle a feat which it is not prudent to attempt without assistance. His gloves are so large and seamy as to make it extremely difficult to grasp the bridle, and quite impossible to buckle a strap. Your French horseman is, in fact, rather like a knight of old, inasmuch as his attendants are required to set him on his horse with his face turned in the right direction, his bridle in his left hand, his whip in his right, and, it is to be supposed, his heart in his mouth. When he is once up there, however, the gallant son of Gaul can teach even some of us, my fox-hunting masters, the way to sit a horse!

We have, however, little to do with such matters here, except in so far as they affect the persons connected with this record. The *Concours Hippique*, be it therefore known, was at its height. Great deeds of horsemanship had been successfully accomplished. The fair had smiled beneath pencilled eyebrows upon the brave in uniform and breeches. At the time when we join the fashionable throng, the fair are smiling their brightest. It is, in fact, an interval for refreshment.

A crowd of well-dressed men jostled each other good-naturedly around a long table, where insolent waiters served tepid coffee, and sandwiches that had been cut by the hand of a knave. In the background a number of ladies nodded encouragement to their cavaliers in the intervals of scrutinising each other's dresses. Many pencilled eyebrows were raised in derision of too little style displayed by some innocent rival, or brought down in disapproval of too much of the same vague quality displayed by one less innocent.

In the midst of these, as in his element, moved the Baron Claude de Chauxville, smiling his courteous ready smile, which his enemies called a grin. He took up less room than the majority of the men around him; he succeeded in passing through narrower places, and jostled fewer people. In a word, he proved to his own satisfaction, and to the discomfiture of many a younger man, his proficiency in the gentle art of getting on in the world.

Not far from him stood a stout gentleman of middle age with a heavy fair moustache brushed upward on either side. This man had an air of distinction which was notable even in this assembly; for there were many distinguished people present, and a Frenchman of note plays his part better than do we dull, self-conscious

islanders. This man looked like a general, so upright was he, so keen his glance, so independent the carriage of his head.

He stood with his hands behind his back, looking gravely on at the social festivity. He bowed and raised his hat to many, but he entered into conversation with none.

'Ce Vassili,' he heard more than once whispered, 'c'est un homme dangereux.'

And he smiled all the more pleasantly.

Now, if a very keen observer had taken the trouble to ignore the throng and watch two persons only, that observer might have discovered the fact that Claude de Chauxville was slowly and purposely making his way towards the man called Vassili.

De Chauxville knew and was known of many. He had but recently arrived from London. He found himself called upon to shake hands *à l'anglais* with this one and that, giving all and sundry his impressions of the perfidious Albion with a *verve* and neatness truly French. He went from one to the other with perfect grace and *savoir-faire*, and each change of position brought him nearer to the middle-aged man with upturned moustache, upon whom his movements were by no means lost.

Finally De Chauxville bumped against the object of his quest—possibly, indeed, the object of his presence at the Concours Hippique. He turned with a ready apology.

'Ah!' he exclaimed. 'The very man I was desiring to see.'

The individual known as 'ce Vassili'—a term of mingled contempt and distrust—bowed very low. He was a plain commoner, while his interlocutor was a baron. The knowledge of this was subtly conveyed in his bow.

'How can I serve M. le Baron?' he inquired in a voice which was naturally loud and strong, but had been reduced by careful training to a tone inaudible at the distance of a few paces.

'By following me to the Café Tantale in ten minutes,' answered De Chauxville, passing on to greet a lady who was bowing to him with the laboured grace of a Parisienne.

Vassili merely bowed and stood upright again. There was something in his attitude of quiet attention, of unobtrusive scrutiny and retiring intelligence, vaguely suggestive of the police—something which his friends refrained from mentioning to him; for this Vassili was a dignified man, of like susceptibilities with ourselves, and justly proud of the fact that he belonged to the *Corps diplomatique*. What position he occupied in that select

corporation he never vouchsafed to define. But it was known that he enjoyed considerable emoluments, while he was never called upon to represent his country or his emperor in any official capacity. He was attached, he said, to the Russian Embassy. His enemies called him a spy; but the world never puts a charitable construction on that of which it has only a partial knowledge.

In ten minutes Claude de Chauxville left the *Concours Hippique*. In the *Champs Elysées* he turned to the left, up towards the *Bois de Boulogne*; turned to the left again, and took one of the smaller paths that lead to one or other of the sequestered and somewhat select cafés on the south side of the *Champs Elysées*.

At the *Café Tantale*—not in the garden, for it was winter, but in the inner room—he found the man called Vassili consuming a pensive and solitary glass of liqueur.

De Chauxville sat down, stated his requirements to the waiter in a single word, and offered his companion a cigarette, which Vassili accepted with the consciousness that it came from a coroneted case.

‘I am rather thinking of visiting Russia,’ said the Frenchman. ‘Again,’ added Vassili in his quiet voice.

De Chauxville looked up sharply, smiled, and waved the word away with a gesture of the fingers that held a cigarette.

‘If you will—again.’

‘On private affairs?’ inquired Vassili, not so much, it would appear, from curiosity as from habit. He put the question with the assurance of one who has a right to know.

De Chauxville nodded acquiescence through the tobacco smoke.

‘The bane of public men—private affairs,’ he said epigrammatically.

But the attaché to the Russian Embassy was either too dense or too clever to be moved to a sympathetic smile by a cheap epigram.

‘And M. le Baron wants a passport?’ he said, lapsing into the useful third person, which makes the French language so much more fitted to social and diplomatic purposes than is our rough northern tongue.

‘And more,’ answered De Chauxville. ‘I want what you hate parting with—information.’

The man called Vassili leant back in his chair with a little smile. It was an odd little smile, which fell over his features

like a mask and completely hid his thoughts. It was apparent that Claude de Chauxville's tricks of speech and manner fell here on barren ground. The Frenchman's epigrams, his method of conveying his meaning in a non-committing and impersonal generality, failed to impress this hearer. The difference between a Frenchman and a Russian is that the former is amenable to every outward influence—the outer thing penetrates. The Russian, on the contrary, is a man who works his thoughts, as it were, from internal generation to external action. The action, moreover, is demonstrative, which makes the Russian different from other northern nations of an older civilisation and a completer self-control.

'Then,' said Vassili, 'if I understand Monsieur le Baron aright, it is a question of private and personal affairs that suggests this journey to . . . Russia?'

'Precisely.'

'In no sense a mission?' suggested the other, sipping his liqueur thoughtfully.

'In no sense a mission. I give you a proof. I have been granted six months' leave of absence, as you probably know.'

'Precisely so, *mo' cher Baron*.' Vassili had a habit of applying to everyone the endearing epithet, which lost a consonant somewhere in his moustache. 'When a military officer is granted a six months' leave, it is exactly then that we watch him.'

De Chauxville shrugged his shoulders in deprecation, possibly with contempt for any system of watching.

'May one call it an *affaire de cœur*?' asked Vassili with his grim smile.

'Certainly. Are not all private affairs such, one way or the other?'

'And you want a passport?'

'Yes—a special one.'

'I will see what I can do.'

'Thank you.'

Vassili emptied his glass, drew in his feet, and glanced at the clock.

'But that is not all I want,' said De Chauxville.

'So I perceive.'

'I want you to tell me what you know of Prince Pavlo Alexis.'

'Of Tver?'

'Of Tver. What you know from your point of view, you

understand, my dear Vassili. Nothing political, nothing incriminating, nothing official. I only want a few social details.'

Again the odd smile fell over the dignified face.

'In case,' said Vassili, rather slowly, 'I should only impart to you stale news and valueless details with which you are already acquainted, I must ask you to tell me first what you know—from your point of view.'

'Certainly,' answered De Chauxville, with engaging frankness. 'The man I know slightly is the sort of thing that Eton and Oxford turn out by the dozen. Well dressed, athletic, silent, a thorough gentleman—*et voilà tout*.'

The face of Vassili expressed something remarkably like disbelief.

'Ye—es,' he said slowly.

'And you?' suggested De Chauxville.

'You leave too much to my imagination,' said Vassili. 'You relate mere facts—have you no suppositions, no questions in your mind about the man?'

'I want to know what his purpose in life may be. There is a purpose—one sees it in his face. I want also to know what he does with his spare time; he must have much to dispose of in England.'

Vassili nodded, and suddenly launched into detail.

'Prince Pavlo Alexis,' he said, 'is a young man who takes a full and daring advantage of his peculiar position. He defies many laws in a quiet persistent way which impresses the smaller authorities and to a certain extent paralyses them. He was in the Charity League—deeply implicated. He had a narrow escape. He was pulled through by the cleverest man in Russia.'

'Karl Steinmetz?'

'Yes,' answered Vassili behind the rigid smile; 'Karl Steinmetz.'

'And that,' said De Chauxville, watching the face of his companion, 'is all you can tell me?'

'To be quite frank with you,' replied the man who had never been quite frank in his life, 'that is all I want to tell you.'

De Chauxville lighted a cigarette with exaggerated interest in the match.

'Paul is a friend of mine,' he said calmly. 'I may be staying at Osterno with him.'

The rigid smile never relaxed,

'Not with Karl Steinmetz on the premises,' said Vassili imperturbably.

'The astute Mr. Steinmetz may be removed to some other sphere of usefulness. There is a new spoke in his Teutonic wheel.'

'Ah!'

'Prince Paul is about to marry . . . the widow of Sydney Bamborough.'

'Sydney Bamborough,' repeated Vassili musingly, with a perfect expression of innocence on his well-cut face. 'I have heard that name before.'

De Chauxville laughed quietly, as if in appreciation of a pretty trick which he knew as well as its performer.

'She is a friend of mine.'

The attaché, as he was pleased to call himself, to the Russian Embassy leant his arms on the table, bending forward and bringing his large fleshy face within a few inches of De Chauxville's keen countenance.

'That makes all the difference,' he said.

'I thought it would,' answered De Chauxville, meeting the steady gaze firmly.

CHAPTER XV.

IN A WINTER CITY.

ST. PETERSBURG under snow is the most picturesque city in the world. The town is at its best when a high wind has come from the north to blow all the snow from the cupola of St. Isaac's, leaving that golden dome, in all its brilliancy, to gleam and flash over the whitened sepulchre of a city.

In winter the Neva is a broad silent thoroughfare between the Vassili Ostrow and the Admiralty Gardens. In the winter the pestilential rattle of the cobble stones in the side streets is at last silent, and the merry music of sleigh-bells takes its place. In the winter the depressing damp of this northern Venice is crystallised and harmless.

On the English Quay a tall narrow house stands looking glumly across the river. It is a suspected house, and watched; for here dwelt Stepán Lanovitch, secretary and organiser of the Charity League.

Although the outward appearance of the house is uninviting,

the interior is warm and dainty. The odour of delicate hot-house plants is in the slightly enervating atmosphere of the apartments. It is a Russian fancy to fill the dwelling-rooms with delicate, forced foliage and bloom. In no country of the world are flowers so worshipped, is money so freely spent in floral decoration. There is something in the sight, and more especially in the scent, of hot-house plants that appeals to the complex siftings of three races which constitute a modern Russian.

We, in the modest self-depreciation which is a national characteristic, are in the habit of thinking, and sometimes saying, that we have all the good points of the Angle and the Saxon rolled satisfactorily into one Anglo-Saxon whole. We are of the opinion that mixed races are the best, and we leave it to be understood that ours is the only satisfactory combination. Most of us ignore the fact that there are others at all, and very few indeed recognise the fact that the Russian of to-day is essentially a modern outcome of a triple racial alliance of which the best component is the Tartar.

The modern Russian is an interesting study, because he has the remnant of barbaric tastes, with ultra-civilised facilities for gratifying the same. The best part of him comes from the East, the worst from Paris.

The Countess Lanovitch belonged to the school existing in Petersburg and Moscow in the early years of the century—the school that did not speak Russian but only French, that chose to class the peasants with the beasts of the field, that apparently expected the deluge to follow soon.

Her drawing-room, looking out on to the Neva, was characteristic of herself. Camellias held the floral honours in vase and pot. The French novel ruled supreme on the side-table. The room was too hot, the chairs were too soft, the moral atmosphere too lax. One could tell that this was the dwelling-room of a lazy, self-indulgent, and probably ignorant woman.

The Countess herself in nowise contradicted this conclusion. She was seated on a very low chair, exposing a slippered foot to the flame of a wood fire. She held a magazine in her hand, and yawned as she turned its pages. She was not so stout in person as her loose and somewhat highly-coloured cheeks would imply. Her eyes were dull and sleepy. The woman was an incarnate yawn.

She looked up, turning lazily in her chair, to note the darkening of the air without the double windows.

'Ah!' she said aloud to herself in French. 'When will it be tea-time?'

As she spoke the words, the bells of a sleigh suddenly stopped with a rattle beneath the window.

Immediately the Countess rose and went to the mirror over the mantelpiece. She arranged without enthusiasm her straggling hair, and put straight a lace cap which was chronically crooked. She looked at her reflection pessimistically, as well she might. It was the puffy red face of a middle-aged woman given to petty self-indulgence.

While she was engaged in this discouraging pastime the door was opened, and a maid came in with the air of one who has gained a trifling advantage by the simple method of peeping.

'It is Monsieur Steinmetz, Madame la Comtesse.'

'Ah! Do I look horrible, Célestine? I have been asleep.'

Célestine was French, and laughed with all the charm of that tactful nation.

'How can Madame la Comtesse ask such a thing? Madame might be thirty-five!'

It is to be supposed that the staff of angelic recorders have a separate set of ledgers for French people, with special discounts attaching to pleasant lies.

Madame shook her head—and believed.

'Monsieur Steinmetz is even now taking off his furs in the hall,' said Célestine, retiring towards the door.

'It is well. We shall want tea.'

Steinmetz came into the room with an exaggerated bow and a twinkle in his melancholy eyes.

'Figure to yourself, my dear Steinmetz,' said the Countess vivaciously. 'Catrina has gone out—on a day like this. *Mon Dieu!* How grey, how melancholy!'

'Without, yes! But here, how different!' replied Steinmetz in French.

The Countess cackled and pointed to a chair.

'Ah! you always flatter. What news have you, bad character?'

Steinmetz smiled pensively, not so much suggesting the desire to impart as the intention to withhold that which the lady called news.

'I came for yours, Countess. You are always amusing—as well as beautiful,' he added, with his mouth well controlled beneath the heavy moustache.

The Countess shook her head playfully, which had the effect of tilting her cap to one side.

'I! Oh, I have nothing to tell you. I am a nun. What can one do—what can one hear in Petersburg? Now in Paris it is different. But Catrina is so firm. Have you ever noticed that, Steinmetz? Catrina's firmness, I mean. She wills a thing, and her will is like a rock. The thing has to be done. It does itself. It comes to pass. Some people are so. Now I, my dear Steinmetz, only desire peace and quiet. So I give in. I gave in to poor Stepán. And now he is exiled. Perhaps if I had been firm—if I had forbidden all this nonsense about charity—it would have been different. And Stepán would have been quietly at home instead of in Tomsk, is it, or Tobolsk? I always forget which. Well, Catrina says we must live in Petersburg this winter, and—*nous voilà!*'

Steinmetz shrugged his shoulders with a commiserating smile. He took the Countess's troubles indifferently, as do the rest of us when our neighbour's burden does not drag upon our own shoulders. It suited him that Catrina should be in Petersburg, and it is to be feared that the feelings of the Countess Lanovitch had no weight as against the convenience of Karl Steinmetz.

'Ah, well!' he said, 'you must console yourself with the thought that Petersburg is the brighter for some of us. Who is this—another visitor?'

The door was thrown open, and Claude de Chauxville walked into the room with the easy grace that was his.

'Madame la Comtesse,' he said, bowing over her hand.

Then he stood upright, and the two men smiled grimly at each other. Steinmetz had thought that De Chauxville was in London. The Frenchman counted on the other's duties to retain him in Osterno.

'Pleasure!' said De Chauxville, shaking hands.

'It is mine,' answered Steinmetz.

The Countess looked from one to the other with a smile on her foolish face.

'Ah!' she exclaimed; 'how pleasant it is to meet old friends! It is like bygone times.'

At this moment the door opened again and Catrina came in. In her rich furs she looked almost pretty.

She shook hands, eagerly, with Steinmetz; her deep eyes searched his face with a singular, breathless scrutiny.

'Where are you from?' she asked quickly.

'London.'

'Catrina,' broke in the Countess, 'you do not remember Monsieur de Chauville! He nursed you when you were a child.'

Catrina turned and bowed to De Chauville.

'I should have remembered you,' he said, 'if we had met accidentally. After all, childhood is but a miniature—is it not so?'

'Perhaps,' answered Catrina; 'and when the miniature develops it loses the delicacy which was its chief charm.'

She turned again to Steinmetz, as if desirous of continuing her conversation with him.

'Monsieur de Chauville, you surely have news?' broke in the Countess's cackling voice. 'I have begged Monsieur Steinmetz in vain. He says he has none; but is one to believe so notorious a bad character?'

'Madame, it is wise to believe only that which is convenient. But Steinmetz, I promise you, is the soul of honour. What sort of news do you crave for? Political, which is dangerous; social, which is scandalous; or Court news, which is invariably false?'

'Let us have scandal, then.'

'Ah! I must refer you to the soul of honour.'

'Who,' answered Steinmetz, 'in that official capacity is necessarily deaf, and in a private capacity is naturally dull.'

He was looking very hard at De Chauville, as if he were attempting to make him understand something which he could not say aloud. De Chauville, from carelessness or natural perversity, chose to ignore the persistent eyes.

'Surely the news is from London,' he said lightly; 'we have nothing from Paris.'

He glanced at Steinmetz, who was frowning.

'I can hardly tell you stale news that comes from London *viâ* Paris, can I?' he continued.

Steinmetz was tapping impatiently on the floor with his broad boot.

'About whom—about whom?' cried the Countess, clapping her soft hands together.

'Well, about Prince Paul,' said De Chauville, looking at Steinmetz with airy defiance.

Steinmetz moved a little. He placed himself in front of Catrina, who had suddenly lost colour. She could only see his

broad back. The others in the room could not see her at all. She was rather small, and Steinmetz hid her as behind a screen.

'Ah!' he said to the Countess, 'his marriage. But Madame the Countess assuredly knows of that.'

'How could she?' put in De Chauville.

'The Countess knew that Prince Paul was going to be married,' explained Karl Steinmetz very slowly, as if he wished to give someone time. 'With such a man as he, "going to be" is not very far from being.'

'Then it is an accomplished fact?' said the Countess sharply.

'Yesterday,' answered Steinmetz.

'And you were not there!' exclaimed Countess Lanovitch, with uplifted hands.

'Since I was here,' answered Steinmetz.

The Countess launched into a disquisition on the heinousness of marrying any but a compatriot. The tone of her voice was sharp, and the volume of her words almost amounted to invective. As Steinmetz was obviously not listening, the lady imparted her views to the Baron de Chauville.

Steinmetz waited for some time, then he turned slowly towards Catrina without actually looking at her.

'It is dangerous,' he said, 'to stay in this warm room with your furs.'

'Yes,' she answered, rather faintly; 'I will go and take them off.'

Steinmetz held the door open for her, but he did not look at her.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE THIN END.

'BUT I confess I cannot understand why I should not be called the Princess Alexis—there is nothing to be ashamed of in the title. I presume you have a right to it?'

Etta looked up from her occupation of fixing a bracelet, with a little glance of inquiry towards her husband.

They had been married a month. The honeymoon—a short one—had been passed in the house of a friend, indeed a relation of Etta's own, a Scotch peer who was not above lending a shooting-

lodge in Scotland on the tacit understanding that there should be some *quid pro quo* in the future.

In answer Paul merely smiled, affectionately tolerant of her bright sharpness of manner. Your bright woman in society is apt to be keen at home. What is called vivacity abroad may easily degenerate into snappiness by the hearth.

'I think it is rather ridiculous being called plain Mrs. Howard-Alexis,' added Etta, with a pout.

They were going to a ball—the first since their marriage. They had just dined, and Paul had followed his wife into the drawing-room. He took a simple-minded delight in her beauty, which was of the description that is at its best in a gorgeous setting. He stood looking at her, noting her grace, her pretty, studied movements. There were, he reflected, few women more beautiful—none, in his own estimation, fit to compare with her.

She had hitherto been sweetness itself to him, enlivening his lonely existence, shining suddenly upon his self-contained nature with a brilliancy that made him feel dull and tongue-tied.

Already, however, he was beginning to discover certain small differences, not so much of opinion as of thought, between Etta and himself. She attached an importance to social function, to social opinion, to social duties, which he in no wise understood. Invitations were showered upon them. A man who is a prince and prefers to drop the title need not seek popularity in London. The very respectable reader probably knows as well as his humble servant, the writer, that in London there is always a social circle just a little lower than one's own which opens its doors with noble, disinterested hospitality, and is prepared to lick the blacking from any famous boot.

These invitations Etta accepted eagerly. Some women hold it little short of a crime to refuse an invitation, and go through life regretting that there is only one evening to each day. To Paul these calls were nothing new. His secretary had hitherto drawn a handsome salary for doing little more than refuse such.

It was in Etta's nature to be somewhat carried away by glitter. A great ball-room, brilliant illumination, music, flowers, and diamonds had an effect upon her which she enjoyed in anticipation. Her eyes gleamed brightly on reading the mere card of invitation. Some dull and self-contained men are only to be roused by the clatter and whirl of a battlefield, and this stirs

them into brilliancy, changing them to new men. Etta, always brilliant, always bright, exceeded herself on her battlefield—a great social function.

Since their marriage she had never been so beautiful, her eyes had never been so sparkling, her colour so brilliant as at this moment when she asked her husband to let her use her title. Hers was the beauty that blooms not for one man alone, but for the multitude; that feeds not on the love of one, but on the admiration of many. The murmur of the man in the street who turned and stared into her carriage was more than the devotion of her husband.

‘A foreign title,’ answered Paul, ‘is nothing in England. I soon found that out at Eton and at Trinity. It was impossible there. I dropped it, and I have never taken it up again.’

‘Yes, you old stupid, and you have never taken the place you are entitled to in consequence.’

‘What place? May I button that?’

‘Thanks.’

She held out her arm while he, with fingers much too large for such dainty work, buttoned her glove.

‘The place in society,’ she answered.

‘Oh! does that matter? I never thought of it.’

‘Of course it matters,’ answered the lady, with an astonished little laugh. (It is wonderful what an importance we attach to that which has been dearly won.) ‘Of course it matters,’ answered Etta; ‘more than—well, more than anything.’

‘But the position that depends upon a foreign title cannot be of much value,’ said the pupil of Karl Steinmetz.

Etta shook her pretty head reflectively.

‘Of course,’ she answered, ‘money makes a position of its own, and everybody knows that you are a prince; but it would be nicer, with the servants and everybody, to be a princess.’

‘I am afraid I cannot do it,’ said Paul.

‘Then there is some reason for it,’ answered his wife, looking at him sharply.

‘Yes, there is.’

‘Ah!’

‘The reason is the responsibility that attaches to the very title you wish to wear.’

The lady smiled, a little scornfully perhaps.

‘Oh! Your grubby old peasants, I suppose,’ she said.

'Yes. You remember, Etta, what I told you before we were married—about the people, I mean?'

'Oh, yes,' answered Etta, glancing at the clock and hiding a little yawn behind her fan.

'I did not tell you all,' went on Paul, 'partly because it was inexpedient, partly because I feared that it might bore you. I only told you that I was vaguely interested in the peasants, and thought it would be a good thing if they could be gradually educated into a greater self-respect, a greater regard for cleanliness and that sort of thing.'

'Yes, dear. I remember,' answered Etta, listlessly contemplating her gloved hands.

'Well, I have not contented myself with thinking this during the last two or three years. I have tried to put it into practice. Steinmetz and I have lived at Osterno six months of the year on purpose to organise matters on the estate. I was deeply implicated in the—Charity League——'

Etta dropped her fan with a clatter into the fender.

'Oh! I hope it is not broken,' she gasped, with a singular breathlessness.

'I do not think so,' replied Paul, picking up the fan and returning it to her. 'Why, you look quite white! What does it matter if it is broken? You have others.'

'Yes, but——' Etta paused, opening the fan and examining the sticks so closely that her face was hidden by the feathers. 'Yes, but I like this one. What is the Charity League, dear?'

'It was a large organisation got up by the hereditary nobles of Russia to educate the people and better their circumstances by discriminate charity. Of course it had to be kept secret, as the bureaucracy is against any attempt to civilise the people—against education or the dissemination of news. The thing was organised. We were just getting to work when someone stole the papers of the League from the house of Count Stepán Lanovitch and sold them to the Government. The whole thing was broken up; Lanovitch and others were exiled. I bolted home, and Steinmetz faced the storm alone in Osterno. He was too clever for them, and nothing was brought home to us. But you will understand that it is necessary for us to avoid any notoriety, to live as quietly and privately as possible.'

'Yes, of course; but——'

'But what?'

'You can never go back to Russia,' said Etta slowly, feeling her ground as it were.

'Oh yes, I can. I was just coming to that. I want to go back this winter. There is so much to be done. And I want you to come with me.'

'No, Paul. No, no! I couldn't do that,' cried Etta, with a ring of horror in her voice, strangely out of keeping with her peaceful and luxurious surroundings.

'Why not?' asked the man, who had never known fear.

'Oh, I should be afraid. I couldn't. I hate Russia.'

'But you don't know it.'

'No,' answered Etta, turning away and busying herself with her long silken train. 'No, of course not. Only Petersburg, I mean. But I have heard what it is. So cold and dismal and miserable. I feel the cold so horribly. I wanted to go to the Riviera this winter. I really think, Paul, you are asking me too much.'

'I am only asking a proof that you care for me.'

Etta gave a little laugh—a nervous laugh with no mirth in it.

'A proof! But that is so *bourgeois* and unnecessary. Haven't you proof enough, since I am your wife?'

Paul looked at her without any sign of yielding. His attitude, his whole being, was expressive of that immovability of purpose which had hitherto been concealed from her by his quiet manner. Steinmetz knew of the mental barrier within this Anglo-Russian soul, against which prayer and argument were alike unavailing. The German had run against it once or twice in the course of their joint labours, and had invariably given way at once.

Etta looked at him. The colour was coming back to her face in patches. There was something unsteady in her eyes—something suggesting that for the first time in her life she was daunted by a man. It was not Paul's speech, but his silence that alarmed her. She felt that trivial arguments, small feminine reasons, were without weight.

'Now that you are married,' she said, 'I do not think you have any right to risk your life and your position for a fad.'

'I have done it with impunity for the last two or three years,' he answered. 'With ordinary precautions the risk is small. I have begun the thing now; I must go on with it.'

'But the country is not safe for us—for you.'

'Oh yes, it is,' answered Paul. 'As safe as ever it has been.'

Etta paused. She turned round and looked into the fire. He could not see her face.

'Then the Ch—Charity League is forgotten?' she said.

'No,' answered her husband quietly. 'It will not be forgotten until we have found out who sold us to the Government.'

Etta's lips moved in a singular way. She drew them in and held them with her teeth. For a moment her beautiful face wore a hunted expression of fear.

'What will you gain by that?' she asked evenly.

'I? Oh, nothing. I do not care one way or the other. But there are some people who want the man—very much.'

Etta drew in a long deep breath.

'I will go to Osterno with you, if you like,' she said. 'Only—only I must have Maggie with me.'

'Yes, if you like,' answered Paul in some surprise.

The clock struck ten, and Etta's eyes recovered their brightness. Woman-like, she lived for the present. The responsibility of the future is essentially a man's affair. The present contained a ball, and it was only in the future that Osterno and Russia had to be faced. Let us also give Etta Alexis her due. She was almost fearless. It is permissible to the bravest to be startled. She was now quite collected. The even, delicate colour had returned to her face.

'Maggie is such a splendid companion,' she said lightly. 'She is so easy to please. I think she would come if you asked her, Paul.'

'If you want her, I shall ask her of course; but it may hinder us a little. I thought you might be able to help us—with the women, you know.'

There was a queer little smile on Etta's face—a smile, one might have thought, of contempt.

'Yes, of course,' she said. 'It is so nice to be able to do good with one's money.'

Paul looked at her in his slow, grave way, but he said nothing. He knew that his wife was cleverer and brighter than himself. He was simple enough to think that this superiority of intellect might be devoted to the good of the peasants of Osterno.

'It is not a bad place,' he said—'a very fine castle, one of the finest in Europe. Before I came away I gave orders for your

rooms to be done up. I should like everything to be nice for you.'

'I know you would, dear,' she answered, glancing at the clock. (The carriage was ordered for a quarter past ten.) 'But I suppose,' she went on, 'that, socially speaking, we shall be rather isolated. Our neighbours are few and far between.'

'The nearest,' said Paul quietly, 'are the Lanovitches.'

'Who?'

'The Lanovitches. Do you know them?'

'Of course not,' answered Etta sharply. 'But I seem to know the name. Were there any in St. Petersburg?'

'The same people,' answered Paul; 'Count Stepán Lanovitch.'

Etta was looking at her husband with her bright smile. It was a little too bright, perhaps. Her eyes had a gleam in them. She was conscious of being beautifully dressed, conscious of her own matchless beauty, almost dauntless, like a very strong man armed.

'Well, I think I am a model wife,' she said, 'to give in meekly to your tyranny; to go and bury myself in the heart of Russia in the middle of winter—— By the way, we must buy some furs; that will be rather exciting. But you must not expect me to be very intimate with your Russian friends. I am not quite sure that I like Russians'—she went towards him, laying her two hands gently on his broad breast and looking up at him—'not quite sure—especially Russian princes who bully their wives. You may kiss me, however, but be very careful. Now I must go and finish dressing. We shall be late as it is.'

She gathered together her fan and gloves, for she had petulantly dragged off a pair which did not fit.

'And you will ask Maggie to come with us?' she said.

He held open the door for her to pass out, gravely polite even to his wife—this old-fashioned man.

'Yes,' he answered; 'but why do you want me to ask her?'

'Because I want her to come.'

(To be continued.)

THE BACKWATER OF LIFE.

BY JAMES PAYN.

It is a strange feeling to one who has been immersed in affairs, and as it were in the mid-stream of what we call Life, to find oneself in its Backwater: crippled and helpless, but still able to see through the osiers on the island between us what is passing along the river—the passenger vessels, and the pleasure boats—and to hear faintly the voices and the laughter, and the strong language mellowed by distance, from the slow-moving barges. The Backwater has its good points; the stream is clear, the autumn woods that overhang the hither bank are fair to look upon, and the plunging of the weir, where all things end, has a welcome sound when the moon shines out and floods the scene with silver. Sometimes on darker nights its roar is menacing, but after a while the sinister sound is lost and it changes to a deep solemnity: then we wonder, as we listen, not without fear, as to what may be upon the other side of it. No one who has once been carried over it can come back again. There is the Mainstream, the Backwater, and the Weir, and there ends the River of Life.

Many of us never reach the Backwater, our journey being cut short abruptly; and few of us wish to reach it. It is, no doubt, a shock to exchange sound for silence, action for immobility. We, who thought ourselves so strong, cannot at first resist a bitter sense of humiliation at being reduced to dependence upon others. There are three ways of reaching the Backwater—by illness, by poverty, and by disgrace—but in the last case many prefer the weir. Some persons, tired for the time of the stress and strain of existence, express the desire that they could escape from it, and be sheltered and serene (as they term it) for the remainder of their days; but this is a very different thing, when they come to experience it, from what they imagine it to be, and very different also is the going into retirement of one's own will and being seized by the rough hands of Fate and laid upon the shelf.

There has been a deal of nonsense written, chiefly by doctors

who have their reasons for being upon good terms with her, about 'kindly Nature.' Nature, like many other folk, can, when in good humour, be kind enough; but she is also capable of great cruelties, which she inflicts with no enjoyment to herself indeed, but with the most absolute indifference to the sufferings of humanity. Her character, for all her smiles and superficial attraction, is that of the genial tavern brawler who, after grievously ill-using his boon companion, takes him home and tends him, whereat all the neighbours exclaim: 'How tender are his ministrations!' but they forget that it was he who caused the patient to be in want of healing. She does but pick you up—and not always that—after she has knocked you down. To speak of her in this fashion will doubtless appear shocking to most people, but on the Backwater we speak as we find. It is one of the peculiarities—I do not say the advantages—of our position that things seem as they are, and not as they look to be, and very, very far, alas! from what we wish them to be. That Nature should be 'so careful of the Type' is no doubt a reflection consolatory to the philosophic mind, but we cannot all be philosophers, and it must be owned she is strangely reckless of the Composer. If one has owed her something in the past, we of the Backwater are by this time quits with her.

There is another thing, among many, on which we who are 'laid by' find ourselves in disagreement with the general voice. A great writer puts into the mouth of one of his characters, a very old and feeble man, the aspiration, 'Heaven keep my memory green!' It is a comfort to him to remember his youth; and this view is almost universally accepted. I cannot say that it is the view of us who live—or let us rather say exist—on the Backwater. We agree rather with the poet who tells us that 'a sorrow's crown of sorrows is remembering happier things.'

We think of the far back time when with strong and supple arms we paddled our own canoe upon the river, with companions full of the high spirits of youth. How we 'put our backs into it' as we made the banks fleet by and enjoyed our blameless victories:

Ah, youth, for years full many and sweet,
'Tis known that you and I were one,

sings the poet, but we did not ourselves know it. We were too happy to be aware of our happiness. We were unconscious, as

'o'er airy cliffs and glittering sands' we took our way, of our likeness to

Those trim skiffs unknown of yore
On winding lake or river wide,
That need no aid of sail or oar,
That heed no spite of wind or tide.

But in this body 'that does us grievous wrong' we remember that it was so, with unspeakable sorrow. Some tell us that we have had our day, and should be content. Perhaps we should be so, but it is cold comfort. Others say, 'Think how many of your fellow-creatures are worse off.' What a text for Christian souls to preach on! It is one of the most terrible of our reflections to remember that this is the case; to know that so many like ourselves are crying, 'Lord, help us!' and waiting, as it seems to us, in vain for His reply. It is said in Holy Writ that 'sorrow may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning'; that is not our case, but the contrary. The 'dead unhappy night' is not so sad for us as the first grey streaks of dawn, when we recognise that another weary day, all emptied of delight, is awaiting us. 'Oh, Lord, how long!' is then our bitter cry. It is said, and with truth, that the spectacle of the happiness of others should always make a good man happy; but even when, as heaven knows, there is no envy and no grudge, one cannot but feel the sense of contrast.

Perhaps our greatest trial is to watch the lovers as they drop down the stream in their light skiff, the boy leaning forward upon his oars to gaze the better at his fair companion, and she with down-drooped eyes, but a smile that proclaims her consciousness of his scrutiny, hangs one little hand in the water and watches it escape through her fingers. The time has come and gone long ago wherein we ought to have been content 'to go wooing in our boys'; but that love-making by proxy, with the fruition for others, was never, as history tells us, a very welcome proceeding. And now, the remembrance of what was once so bright and sweet and fair, the parting and the meeting, the glance that was mirrored in a flash from loving eyes, the tell-tale pressure of the gentle hand, the stolen kiss so tenderly forgiven, is of all remembrances the most intolerable. Selfish? Yes; do not suppose that self, though different indeed from what it used to be, with no bravery of pretence about it, querulous, degraded, does not still cling to us: it is only to be washed away by the cleansing waters of the weir. Yet, after all, we have no envy, nor would we deprive our

fellow-creatures of a single pleasure if we could. It is the mere sense of loss, irremediable and complete, that causes our despair. It will be shocking to many persons (who are still alive and in the world, however, and can follow the pursuits they love) to learn that such views are entertained by individuals in our position. We are generally depicted as being philosophic or resigned, just as the blind (God help them!) are always described as 'cheerful'; I do not know on whose account this hypocrisy is maintained.

Alas! we have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that content surpassing wealth
The sage in meditation found.

But it is not to be wondered at that others should take a brighter view of our condition. Just (again) as in the case of the blind, who are seen at their best in company, and strive to hide their sad deficiency from those who visit them, so when our friends come to see us, we put on our best looks, and draw on our little store of smiles to welcome them; and they give a good report of us to our acquaintances ('bright and cheery as ever, I do assure you'), and never guess that when they have gone the curtain falls, and our darkness is deeper than ever.

These visits of our friends are at once the cause of our joy and of our sorrow. It is sweet to be remembered after social death. Our most tender reflection is the thought that when nothing can be gained by it, not even the reciprocity of geniality, these dear kind folks leave their business or their pleasure, and look in upon us, day after day. The Backwater is not a lively scene. It is always in the shadow projected by the platform above the weir, and the noise of the falling waters is very melancholy; yet these good souls do not desert us. Nay, there is something in our condition that touches them in quite a remarkable manner. Even those who, when we were among them, were mere acquaintances develop the most friendly feeling, and make us ashamed of our previous ignorance of its existence. To 'kindly Nature,' as she is called by those who have experienced only her good offices, we have, to tell the honest truth, but little to be thankful for; it is to men and women that our feebly beating hearts go forth in unspeakable gratitude. There is one—one—consolation in our miserable lot, that it has brought us face to face with the immeasurable goodness of Humanity. Let the divines say what they will of those who have been made after the image of their Creator;

let them heap upon them all the faults of their fallen nature; let the cynics aver that what seems good in them is only another form of selfishness: we on the Backwater have good cause to know that these traducers lie. Oh, Love that cherishes its object when all that makes it lovely has departed, that prefers to possess it useless as a broken toy rather than to lose it, that slaves for it and sacrifices its all to give it daily comfort, that holds all menial offices as gracious opportunities for mitigation of discomfort and of pain; we know you now as we have never known you before. Oh, Friendship, whose smile has been always dear to us, but of the greatness of whose fond and faithful heart we have never guessed, forgive us for our former ignorance. If even there be no heaven hereafter, there are angels here. Alas! though our gratitude can be told, it can never be shown. There are two words that ring in our ears far more sorrowfully than the warning of the weir: 'Too late! Too late!' We are as dead men, though (thanks to these angelic visitors) not 'out of mind.' We think, if a miracle were worked and we could 'get about again,' that we should spend the remainder of our lives in striving to repay them, in doing the like kind offices we have received from them to others in the same sad case as ourselves. There is no harm in having such thoughts, and, alas! no good.

News is brought us of what is going on in the world—in politics, in literature, and in social life. It interests us very much, but in quite a different fashion from the old one. We are no longer actors but spectators, and, as it seems to us, at an immense distance from the stage. The performances are, as it were, in another planet. Our visitors, with tender instinct, select only such topics as are agreeable to us, and strive to conceal from us the reason—that we are too weak for opposition. But, alas! we know the reason very well. A certain morbid sensitiveness takes the place of intelligence with us, and on the other hand is unsuspected. They are unaware—as, indeed, how could it be otherwise?—that their lightest remarks sometimes distress us. They forget when they praise the weather that we shall never more feel the sunshine, nor breathe the fresh air, nor put foot to the ground again. Again, in their wish to cheer us, they profess to see some improvement in our condition, which in fact never takes place. The best that happens is that the change for the worse, which is continuous, is imperceptible. Ordinary invalids have their 'good days.' With us on the Backwater it is not so;

there are only days that are less bad than the others. What is worse than all, some good folks think to raise our spirits by the reflection that we may live for months, and even years, longer. Because they are in love with life themselves, they think that, though in some less degree perhaps, it is dear to us also; they cannot conceive a state of existence in which one's chief hope and constant prayer are to get it ended. Others, from equally kind motives, find another ground of congratulation in the fact that, though the nearness of the Weir is evident, we are not moved by it. They do not understand that one of the saddest conditions to which the human mind can be reduced—not from faith, but from pain and weariness—is no longer to fear the Shadow feared of man.

MOONLIGHT.

BY A SON OF THE MARSHES.

'Hoo—Hoo—hoo—hoo—Hoo—e—Hoo—hoo—Hoo—hoo' shouts out our old friend the brown owl, from the top of one of the great trees that surround us, for this is his own special domain. Moonlight is beautiful at all times and seasons, but when a large wood, free from stunted undergrowth, is lit up by the soft light of a full moon, a network of light and shade is seen above and below that could not be seen elsewhere, for the light creeps along the interlaced branches looking like silver and ebony. Before you have fully made out the fitness of this comparison to your satisfaction, some of the huge silver beeches come in the range of light. The shadows from the limbs and branches above chequer the boles, creep down them, and over the carpet of fallen leaves; shadows softly moving; at one time broken up, then for a short space they are massed, to break again, and scatter themselves in all directions. Where some of the trees have fallen, leaving gaps and open spaces below, bright blue-green patches show, about which dark grey dots are astir. These are rabbits feeding on the short tender grass; for nothing is left bare long; directly through some natural accident a larger growth ceases to exist, a smaller one of a very different nature is ready to take the place of it.

Old woods, when leafless, if the moon is high up and bright over all, provide a series of ever-changing pictures. Nothing, you fancy, could surpass that effect of light and shade; but the light shifts on, and, if possible, another picture is presented more beautiful than the one that has gone. That owl's hooting is about all you are likely to hear, and he will not shout to the moon for any length of time, for his mate will join him on a hunting expedition, far away from his sleeping quarters. And now the hooter has flighted, and not even a wood-mouse rustles the dry crisp leaves which are so thickly gathered under the trees. From a distant farm the shrill crow of a rooster is heard with startling clearness. If Reynard is about and is sharp set for his late dinner, probably he will canter off towards the spot whence the crowing proceeds, whilst at the same time his sensitive nose and

fine ears will inform him if any creature is handy for him to interview as he travels along. Predaceous creatures have to work hard at times for their food, for, if they are gifted with organs of destruction, those that they prey on are equally gifted with the organs of self-preservation.

The soft light fades slowly, lights and shadows mingle for a brief space, and then the woods are one great mass of shadow, and we pass, as quietly as it is possible for us to do, up the main ride that runs through them. This is one of the most stringent rules to be observed, if you wish to be at peace with yourself and other people, move as quietly as you can when studying nature at night. Avoid all farms and lonely houses as you would the plague, for large dogs of a courageous breed are the guardians of the night there, and they are loose. Quite apart from this, a footstep on any road at night will cause dogs to challenge, and thus disturb their masters. It is far more satisfactory to go out in the wilds at night where you will not have any company but your own.

It is moonlight on the waters, a summer sea as they call it, just enough to send the craft along in a smooth fashion towards port, for the small fleet of boats is homeward bound from open water. Not even the curlew's whistle is to be heard, for these birds have not left their moorland haunts yet to visit the tide. There is no sound but the lip and lap of the waters round the piles at the base of the long sea wall that winds and twists like some monstrous form, and vanishes in the distance. The marshlands that the wall protects show as one vast flat of silver-grey, obscured in places by floating fogs from stagnant lagoons.

But seawards all is bright and fair; small patches of light show about the size of a table-cover, and the water where those patches show is one long line of molten silver. The fleet is making the mouth of the harbour creek. To one not acquainted with the locality of this network of waterways, as dangerous now as it was in the past, it all looks like open water, but there are sudden bends where great arms of the sea rush up, miles inland, to the safe harbours of fishing towns.

It is remarkable how far you can hear sounds on the water, or borne on it at night. As we have made for the mouth of the harbour creek, the boats will pass in comparatively near to us. Here they come, six of them, one after the other, their usual style of entering the creek, for obvious reasons. A voice on board the

leading boat, one that I know well, strikes up in a 'shanty catch,' one that is too old for us to get at the date of—

Oh, the herring loves the bright moon-light,
And the mackerel loves the wind,
But the oyster loves the dredger's song
For he comes of a gentle kind.

The song proceeds from old Craft's son; he is giving vent to his feelings on making port on the harbour tide.

The boat passes on, the others follow silently; five have gone round the bend, the sixth has not reached the creek.

Some one on board of her is singing, or rather wailing out like a sprat loon, 'The Banks of Allan Water.' It is old Piper Owlet crooning to himself in the joy of his heart over the moonlight and the ripple of the tide. This and 'The Isle of St. Helena' were Piper's favourite songs—in fact, the only songs he knew. 'St. Helena' was looked upon by all of us as a special treat; as he was wont to observe, it consarned the nation; he could not often be coaxed to sing it. When the old boy did consent to give it you could have heard a pin drop. As to his face, well, it was grave beyond conception, and the best of it was, a good sound moral, as Piper said, was tacked on to the end on it. In his best days he no doubt owned a good tenor voice, but this had got out of gear a bit, and Piper now wailed rather than sang. For all that, none were listened to with more attention or more respect than he; there was something pathetic about both the songs and the singer.

As old songs are passing away, I will give our readers the first and last verse of 'St. Helena,' as Piper rendered them :—

Now Napoleon's away from all wars and all fighting,
He's gone to a place that he ne'er can delight in;
He may sigh to the winds that sweep the wild billows
As he looks out o'er the seas that surround St. Helena.

The last verse contained the moral :—

Now all you of high estate cast aside all ambition,
Or by some decree of fate it may change your condition,
Be steadfast in time, for what's to come you know not,
Or your fate may be like his on the Isle of St. Helena.

A faulty composition, yet to our minds well suited to the wailing voice of the singer, and it always pleased those who listened to him so intently. Time and place have much to do with the fitness of things. The wild scream of the curlew would be sadly out of place in the woodlands; but on the beach, with the lap of the tide for accompaniment, it is in thorough harmony.

Sometimes when shadows pass, in ever-varying fashion, in the moonlight we think of those who have passed away from us like shadows, and it seems almost yesterday that we hailed each other on the foreshore and by the tide.

The moon is shining bright and clear; dark masses of cloud roll up from the west, but they have not yet got high enough to pass in front of her. What a glorious sight old Holmbury is by moonlight, with vast portions of the weald below in deep shadow! Who could do full justice to its beauties, the fir woods, and the tracts of heather? Glade after glade shows as you wander along over the soft green turf, lit up by the light of the moon. There is colour here, even by moonlight; subdued in tone it is, but still colour. The fir woods are deep purple-grey. As to the heather, it looks like a vast series of carpets spread out in all directions—the deepest madder-brown heightened by the turquoise green of the grass rides, where the light falls direct on them, and the glistening of the stone heaps and sandy paths.

To the left of us the hill of Leith, looming out high up from the vale below; on the right, Ewhurst and the extensive range beyond, running down towards the west. It is a vast picture in monochrome, lit up by silvery lights; not a fern owl churrs, not a beetle goes droning by, for the clouds are getting higher, and they are heavily charged with rain. But with the exception of a slight shower, just enough to bead the cover and cause the bramble leaves to glitter, the clouds pass over, and the moon is, as the children sing, as bright as day. Let us stand quite still to let the scent of the cool earth reach us, and the odour from the firs, heather, grass, and ferns, with much more that is hidden from your sight. Life is in the air by night as well as by day, the life of the hills and the woods, the life of a summer's night that has no real darkness, showing some of Nature's workings so plainly that those 'who run may read.'

Moonlight on the sands, and floating mists that wander about high up, veiling the moon's brightness for a time, as if huge curtains of gauze had been drawn in front of her. A capful of wind up aloft drives the mist clouds away. Then the sands and the waters show out as one vast white plain. Very beautiful it looks; but it is a treacherous beauty, for the greater part of these are quicksands that boil and bubble at every tide. That dark streak lit up by a flash is a cut in the sands where the water has already forced itself. If you could stand there and look at it,

you would see the water rushing down that cut like a mill race. Live sands are there. Marks exist on all these live sands, showing where you can travel in comparative safety; but you must know them well, or woe betide you!

Getting on the wrong side of a thin line of stakes, driven deep down in the solid part of the sands, simply means being washed up dead by-and-bye. It is not on the surface that the sands boil and bubble, but below, and before you are aware of it you are ankle-deep. On either side all pools show for a moment and vanish again. The tide is forcing its way through the sands. Knee-deep at times, you squelch through sand and water to gain the stake-line, and well for you if the right side has been gained. Even then the shore has to be made at top speed. You might think that if a fowler was a good swimmer, surely, if the worst came, he could swim ashore on the tide. He might do this if the set of the inshore current did not exist; but it does, a belt of it a quarter of a mile in width; and this rushes and whirls at terrific speed along the shore-line, finally turning out to sea, banking up the sand-bar with its silt.

The strongest swimmer in that set of the tide would be washed away like a feather from a gull. Even seals and fish avoid as much as possible these tide races. I have watched small fishing-craft for hours, under certain tidal influences, feeling their way up the tortuous channels; to all appearance it is open water, but a deviation on either side of little more than six feet meant grounding and the loss of the catch. Hideous death-traps they look when the tide is out, and that is just what they really are; like steep railway-cuttings, with water at the bottom in place of rails. I have been down some of them in a boat and swum over others. But sometimes sharks have been captured there. They had followed the teeming shoals of various fish; one followed a shoal up a narrow creek and got stranded. If you would know what manner of a sea-monster can visit our shores, go to the South Kensington Natural History Museum, and look at the great shark there which was taken off Shanklin in the Isle of Wight. Far more was heard about them in the past than there is at present. The shark is as cunning as a fox and as ferocious as a tiger, but the great one alluded to above is harmless where men are concerned, though gruesome to look at.

If you wish to hear a perfect Babel of voices from the fowl, pull in a skiff just off a sand-flat when they are feeding by moon-

light, about one hour before the tide makes in. You will not be able to see much, for if thousands shoot over the flat surface they only look like a smoke-cloud rushing along. But you will have something to remember. Never take a gun out in the skiff with you, lest you be tempted to fire towards shore, where the noise comes from, and might kill some fowler stretched out for a big shot, with his head only raised close to the tide. Also remember, if you are out for observation, to keep far enough out in your skiff, or some one firing from the shore seawards may kill or at least seriously wound you.

Moonlight, the soft full radiance of the harvest moon, falls on a peaceful God's Acre on one of our Surrey hills. So bright is it that we can read the records of the departed on the tombstones. The old tower with its shingled spire glistens in the light that plays and lingers around the quaint porch, touching here and there, until at last a flood of light falls on the flagstones of the porch, silently showing the old oak door, iron-clamped and nail-studded, that guards the entrance to the House of God.

There, where old and young alike rest in peace until the dawn of the hereafter, on one stone full in the light we read :—

‘Come unto Me all ye that are weary, and I will give you rest.’

All the pleasure of living, all the hopes and fears, the disappointments and bitterness of heart will soon be over. This is a strange life, this life of ours ; for if a man can barely know himself, search himself as he will, it is surely rashness on his part to judge others. The why and the wherefore of things we shall perhaps know when all that is mortal of us rests in peace there under the moonlight.

A FATAL RESERVATION.

BY R. O. PROWSE,

AUTHOR OF 'THE POISON OF ASPES.'

BOOK V.—Continued.

CHAPTER VI.

Hopes die.

NEARLY three-quarters of an hour had gone by, and the rain was at last beginning to fall in large, intermittent drops. Waveney was standing at the door, watching the play of the lightning. It was almost dark; the twilight, deepened by the murkiness of the storm, was fast passing into night. The rattling crash of the thunder was near and frequent. Away up in the wood he could see through the gloom the trees bowing and quivering in the wind, and a wail, like a sound of pain, seemed to be borne from them across the storm. The air was full of strange noises, and from time to time strange lights seemed to glance from the sky and touch the hissing waters of the canal, burnishing them with an eerie splendour. At moments the rustle of the reeds grew almost articulate, while voices appeared to rise from the grass, and invisible storm-spirits to laugh and revel round the cottage. And then would come a momentary lull, when the creaking of an outhouse door, lost in the previous turmoil, was the only sound which the ear caught, and a feeling of awe, greater than even the storm itself could inspire, stole over and held the senses. At last the rain poured down, torrent-like in its fury; and Waveney, having closed the door, returned to the little room where tea was being made ready.

A glowing wood fire was burning in a small grate between wide hobs under the opening of a capacious chimney. The table was spread with a rough white cloth and such humble dainties as a somewhat limited larder could afford. China figures, faded photographs in frames, a couple of highly-coloured grocers' almanacs, and a bank of flower-pots in the window, were the parlour's principal adornments, the Windsor chairs which stood

on the tiled floor where the widths of Dutch carpet ended giving it an uncomfortably polished air of disuse. The atmosphere, which, like that of most closed rooms, was a trifle musty, was being changed by the fire, to which the old woman was devoting herself—an old woman of some sixty or more years, with happy old eyes, a face in which the bright contentment of a second summer gladdened the autumnal furrows, and the comfortable name of Perry. A white mob cap covered her grey hair, giving her an appearance that suggested responsibility and wisdom.

‘I don’t know what would have become of us without your shelter,’ said Waveney, as he drew Maggie towards the table. ‘It is an awful storm.’

‘Why, it’s a storm as one wouldn’t like to turn a dog out in, let alone a human being,’ said Mrs. Perry feelingly.

‘And it is hardly the time of year for thunder-storms either.’

‘We don’t often get ’em as early by a month or so; not but what I hev known ’em a deal earlier; and I can remember one as come—well, it must be some years ago now—just about Christmas time. I could tell all day it was coming by the way the pig—Oh, gracious goodness! what’s that? It must be the window busted open.’

The wind had burst open the window, and a rush of air came in that tossed up the blind and blew the flames away from the candles. But the window having been secured, and the blind put back in its place, the conversation was resumed, though without further reference to the presumably prophetic pig.

‘How far is it to Smeltington?’ Waveney inquired presently.

‘The best part o’ five mile.’

‘By the road?’

‘No; it’s more by the road. It’s the best part o’ five mile by the canal.’

‘And how far is it to Disley?’

‘Not above two mile, or two mile an’ a quarter. How it do rain! It’s like to be a second deluge. It do seem hard as it should come the night as my old man’s away.’

‘I suppose Disley is the nearest village?’

‘We reckon Guestling nearer than Disley. Guestling is just upon a mile an’ a half. I’ll take that bottle,’ she broke off, a vinegar bottle standing by one of the candles having caught her eye, ‘and get some fresh. It’s stood and got mothery. I ought to have remembered when I put it out. But there,’ she soliloquised

as she went from the room, 'I've got a head—and so has a pin.'

Maggie rose from the table, and, going into the little passage, opened the outer door to look at the night. A vivid flash that seemed to glance close before her drove her back a pace or two into the passage, and forced her to hide her dazzled eyes in her hands. Uncovering them, she looked out again at the storm. The fury of the wind scattered the rain, at one moment flinging it in a dense, heavy gust against the cottage, and the next catching it like a whirlwind and making it circle and eddy, as if, jealous of its presence, it would toss it back to the clouds. A branch of a poplar that grew at some little distance from the house was brought crashing to the ground, and the air was full of the groans of the labouring trees that mingled with the hiss of the canal in a kind of wild storm chorus. By-and-by her eyes became riveted on the tossing waters not ten yards before her. It must have been that the lightning had dazzled her sight, for it presently appeared to her as if they had parted, and having gathered themselves up into sheer black walls, had formed a pit of immense depth; and though she had not moved from the door, she felt that she was looking down into it, and it was full of a strange light. Then—how she could not tell—she was beginning to descend when she saw that the waters at the top were about to fall, and in a moment must inevitably close over her, and . . .

'Come in, dearest, do. The lightning has blinded you. I believe you would have fallen if I had not caught you.' And Waveney shut the door, and led her back to the lighted room.

She was very pale; it was some moments before she could speak.

'What are we to do?' she asked hoarsely.

'We cannot go yet. It is impossible to face such a storm as this.'

'But it may last hours. What time is it now?'

Waveney took out his watch. 'It has stopped!' he exclaimed.

'But by the clock in the corner it is a quarter to eight.'

'A quarter to eight! No, it cannot be so late. It was broad daylight when we came here.'

'But remember, the days are lengthening. It was late when we left your house; we were sitting a long time on the tree; we have been here now at least——'

'Yes, but what are we to do?' she repeated impatiently, interrupting him.

'Well, dearest, what can we do? We must wait till the storm has abated. It may not last more than an hour, but even if it lasts another two we shall still be back in Smeltington well before midnight. I have no doubt we shall be able to hire a carriage of some kind at Guestling. It will be too late to get a train. Come, Maggie dear,' he said, more tenderly, drawing her to him, 'don't bother about it. What does it matter when you get home? Let us make the most of these passing moments. Let us—begin to be happy, shall we?'

She made no answer. She was looking before her into the fire.

'I have so much to tell you,' he went on. 'I have made several plans for the future, and I want to talk them over with you. I think we must go abroad, to begin with—just for a time, you know. You won't mind that? I think it wouldn't be a bad idea to spend the summer in Normandy. I know a little retreat which will give us seclusion, and at the same time is fairly accessible. There will be a good deal to arrange of one kind and another, and I don't want to go too far away. . . . Ah, dearest,' he broke off, 'you have made me so happy. And happiness has not come much my way of late. Let us get our plans made as soon as possible; I am horribly impatient to begin our new life.' And he would have kissed her, but she turned away her face.

The brightness faded suddenly from his. This little act of hers chilled him. He scanned her features. She kept her eyes upon the fire. But for that movement of evasion he could have fancied she was unconscious of his presence.

'Maggie?' he asked.

Still she did not speak.

'What is it?' he whispered.

She kept her face turned from him. He would have taken her in his arms, and drawn some answer from her, if at that moment he had not heard the footstep of their hostess in the passage.

'I'm sorry to hev kep' you waiting, sir, and you, miss—— Why, if you hev'n't both done!' she exclaimed in the injured tone of one whose hospitality has been neglected. 'You hadn't ought to starve for a storm no more nor you should for a cold. They do say "Starve a fever," but I'm like my old pig, I don't hold with starving for nothing myself, except it be for want of victuals, though there are plenty o' them as does, and some on 'em only to put it on their backs. But you aren't looking very grand, miss. Is there nothing I can get for you? I have a bottle of red-currant

wine by me, my own make, and I'd open it with pleasure, and make a little warm, with a piece of dry toast: maybe the storm's upset you.'

'No; no, thank you,' she said. 'I am quite well: at least, my head aches; but it is only from the thunder.'

'Well, if you really won't, and if you and the gentleman won't take anything more, I'll clear away, for heving the things about do clutter up a small room so. And another log wouldn't be amiss, for one feels to want a bit of fire a night like this. I'll fetch the brush and sweep up a bit; and I hope you and the gentleman 'll make yourselves comfortable and at home like.'

Waveney and Maggie thanked her, and she began to move about them, accompanying her work with much conversation. When the table was at last cleared, another log thrown on the fire, and the hearth tidied, she left them to themselves, while she washed up and put away the tea-things.

Neither of them spoke for some moments. A great dread was stealing over Waveney. Whether he would or not, he felt that the meaning of her silence was being borne in upon him. He tried to shut it out, to put it away; but he tried to no purpose. And the meaning of it was that she had repented, had changed her mind: that she would not go with him, that he had lost her.

In a moment his old life seemed to rise up before him. He was back again in the old joyless existence. He was looking back upon it as it had been; he could see what the future would be; even the recollection of many dreary little details obtruded itself upon him. On no account would he appeal to her for the truth. He saw clearly enough that he had it. The battle would have to be fought out again—he knew it; but he had not the courage to begin the struggle to-night.

'I think I shall have another look at the weather,' he said, rising as he spoke.

If he could have seen the look in her face when he had left her! Was it despair? Was it infinite sorrow for the pain she must give him? Or was there something in it that told of even more than despair? Whatever it was, if he could but have seen it, he would most surely not have left her that night.

When he came back, that expression had left her face.

'I think,' he said, 'it is not quite so tempestuous.'

'No?'

'No; the wind is certainly less violent. Will you come and look out?'

'No, no, no,' she cried quickly, shuddering perceptibly.

'Let me stir the fire. You are cold, dear,' he said, raising the log a little to make a blaze.

'The storm has made it cold, hasn't it?'

'Yes, very,' and he stirred the fire again.

'I thought it had,' she said.

He looked at her inquiringly. The thought came to him that something more might be passing in her mind than he suspected. But the thought left him; he returned to his chair on the other side of the hearth.

The tick of the big clock in the corner, the constant souging of the voiceless wind, the beat of the rain in fitful gusts against the casement, the noise of the fire as the log sank in the embers—these were the only sounds.

Presently they were joined by Mrs. Perry, to whom Waveney insisted upon restoring her own seat in the corner, and took himself the chair which she placed for him between Maggie and herself.

'My old man's gone to nuss a sick friend of hisn down at the lockhouse yonder,' indicating the direction with a jerk of her knitting-needles, volunteered the loquacious old lady. 'His brother hev been nussing of him, but he's got knocked up wi' setting up wi' him and getting no rest, so my old man's gone to take his place. I say his wife's sister should hev gone and took care of him—her as has married John Birkett who keeps the Greyhound, that's the inn at Guestling. But I don't think they hev ever been over good friends—not even at the first.'

'I suppose the man has lost his wife, then?' said Waveney, wishing to be civil.

She paused a moment. 'You mean dead?'

'Yes.'

'She may be for aught I know: that's mostly how it ends. No good never comes on it.'

Another pause.

'I'll allow she had a deal to put up wi' from him, but a woman never does no good by running away from her duty.'

Waveney waited for a little fuller explanation.

'They do say as it is the drink that is the cause of his illness. It's certain they'd hev been a good deal better off than what they was if it hadn't been for the drink. You may say as he's ruined

the home since he's took to it. And that was why she left him; though, contrairy-like, it was a brewer's man as she went off with.'

'If her husband ruined her home, don't you think she had some excuse?'

'I've never knowed a woman do any good by running away from her husband, nor a husband by running away from his wife, yet. All as ever I've knowed do it hev come to certain misery in the end. Supposing all the husbands and wives as don't get on was to separate when they thought proper, there'd be a pretty state o' things! And if it's right for one, why ain't it right for all?'

'Your marriage has been a happy one?' Waveney suggested.

'Yes, thank God! it hev. Though we've had our troubles like the rest.'

Maggie had been sitting very still. Whether she had been listening to what had been said, Waveney could scarcely tell. She had shown no sign of interest. Now, suddenly rousing, she asked, 'How far is the lock from here?'

'Just upon a mile, we reckon it. It's the big lock where the barges goes through to the river.'

'But the canal doesn't end there?' said Waveney.

'No; that go right on into the next county, and further too. The lock is on a branch like, about a quarter o' a mile long, which runs from the canal to the river, do you see? The house where the man lives stands at the canal end o' the lock. It's a lonely place—lonelier even than this. But to go to it you couldn't miss it; you've only got to keep straight along the towing-path, going from Smeltington.'

Maggie's ashy features turned a shade paler.

No one spoke again for some minutes. The knitting-needles clicked a cheerful accompaniment to the tick of the big clock in the corner, and the rustle of the wind, now less turbulent, round the house.

Then, after a good deal of wheezing and panting, as if it had as much difficulty in getting its strike as an asthmatical person his breath, the old clock in the corner with solemn deliberation struck nine, and it was many seconds before the echo of that great effort had quite passed away. Waveney went once more to look at the weather.

'Excuse me, miss, but you do look very poorly,' said the old woman, with motherly solicitude. 'I'm sure you don't ought to walk back all that way.'

'I don't feel very well. I am tired.'

'There, now! Let me make you a little drop o' my wine warm, and a little bit o' dry toast to eat wi' it, shall I?' she asked, coaxingly. 'It'll warm and comfort you. I expect you're upset wi' the storm, that's what it is.'

'Thank you; I think I should like it now.'

'And look ye here, miss, I've a spare room upstairs, and I've got a pair of sheets ready aired—why, I'd pop 'em on the bed directly, and with pleasure, if you'd condescend to stay the night. I'm sure you don't look fit to walk.'

'Have you a room to spare?' Maggie asked.

'Yes, miss, I hev.'

'Then I will stay,' she said decisively.

Mrs. Perry's pleasant old face brightened. 'That's right, miss, and I'm sure I'll do my best to make you comfortable all I can. The gentleman 'll tell your friends as he's left you safe, and I dare say be so good as to come for you in the morning—wouldn't you now, sir?' she asked, Waveney having come back into the room.

'Do you mean to remain the night?' he said, turning to Maggie.

She hesitated a moment before she answered, and again he detected something in her manner which made him uneasy.

'Yes; I have decided to stay the night,' she said firmly. 'I don't feel well enough to walk home.'

'But we were not going to walk—at least, not further than the nearest place at which we could get some kind of vehicle. Where would that be?' he inquired, turning to Mrs. Perry.

'You could get a trap at the Greyhound, I expect.'

'Don't you think you could walk so far as that? It is still a wild night, but it is nothing to what it has been. If we——'

'No, no,' she insisted, interrupting him. 'I must stay.'

'You mean, you don't feel well enough to walk even so far as that?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said, 'that's what I mean.'

Waveney felt that his uneasiness was increasing.

'I do think the lady would be a good deal best where she is,' put in Mrs. Perry. 'I'm sure I'll do all I can to make her comfortable, and you'll tell her friends as——'

'Yes, I am sure you will do that,' he said.

What should he do?

He had become very reluctant to leave her. Yet if she wished to remain—if she did not feel well enough to return with him—what could he do? She certainly looked very weak and ill.

‘I can’t think but what you would do best to leave her with me,’ pleaded Mrs. Perry once more. ‘She do look so very poorly.’

‘Shall I fetch a doctor?’ he asked.

Maggie was standing by the table. She came to Waveney, and, placing her hand on his arm, said softly, ‘You know I don’t want a doctor. All I need is a little rest. I am very tired: that is all. Now, you will go back to Smeltington soon, won’t you? How far is it?—five miles?’

‘But if I am to come in the morning—— Why, dearest, you are trembling like a leaf.’

‘I’ll get that wine warmed,’ exclaimed the kind-hearted old woman, bustling out of the room as she said it.

‘Don’t come for me in the morning,’ she muttered in a hoarse, hollow voice, moving from him.

‘Not come for you? Why shouldn’t I? I have decided to try the hospitality of the Greyhound—three miles and a half saved such a night as this are worth considering—and why shouldn’t we return to Smeltington together?’

‘Don’t come, I say.’

‘But why not?’ he asked faintly. ‘Good God! are we to part so soon?’ he thought.

With a tray in one hand, and a kettle in the other, their hostess bustled back into the room. ‘There, it’ll soon bile,’ she said, putting the kettle on the fire, ‘and it’ll do you good. It’s something warm and comforting as you want.’

‘They will be able to take me in at the Greyhound, I suppose?’ he asked.

‘You’re going there, sir, for the night?’

‘Yes.’

‘They’ll be able to take you in, and Mrs. Birkett ’ll make you comfortable, too.’

‘Which will be my nearest way?’

‘You keep straight along the towing-path going from Smeltington, the same as if you was going to the lock, and in about half a mile you’ll come to a bridge. You don’t cross, but you turn up to the right, and the road ’ll take you straight to the village. The Greyhound is one o’ the first houses you come to.’

Waveney thanked her. She offered him an overcoat of her husband's, which he accepted. She went into the passage to fetch it.

Maggie was standing by the fire with her face turned from him.

'Good-night, dearest,' he said, taking her hand in his.

She looked at him fixedly without answering.

'Shall I come for you in the morning?' he asked, uneasily.

With a piteous cry she threw her arms round his neck and pressed him passionately to her, the homely glow of the firelight falling about her head as the rays of the sunlight had fallen some hours before. 'Mine, mine!' she murmured under her breath; 'mine to the end.'

Then suddenly she released him—even pushed him from her—and, without another word, turned away.

The old woman followed Waveney to the door. She looked after him till his figure was swallowed by the darkness; then, having shut and bolted the door, returned to Maggie, who was sitting once more by the fireside.

CHAPTER VII.

A person of less courage—that is, of less constitution—will answer as the heroine does, giving way to fate, to conventionalism, to the actual state and doings of men and women.

BRIGHTLY the morning sun, looking through amber mists at 'the wrecks of night and storm,' shone upon the ivy-hidden casements of Mrs. Perry's cottage, sparkled upon the placid waters of the canal, and gilded the yellow catkins of the willows on the bank opposite, around which the humming bees had begun to make murmurous music. The blackbird was at song again in the wood on the little hill, the sluggard celandine was beginning to open its golden stars, the crane's-bill was shaking the raindrops from its rose-coloured bells, and the tuft of daffodils in the meadow—a colony from Mrs. Perry's patch of garden—was once more dancing in the sunlight, not to be outdone by the sparkling waves in glee. But everywhere the ground was strewn with the débris of the storm, and many a violet and primrose lay buried beneath the burden of fallen boughs about the little wood; while the path that led to the sty of Mrs. Perry's pig stood so deep in water that the good soul's pattens had

scarcely kept her feet dry when she had gone to give that amiable and companionable beast his breakfast.

Mrs. Perry, in a print dress tucked up in such a manner as to yield a liberal display of petticoat, with a red three-cornered handkerchief tied about her head, was standing at her cottage door, with the sun full upon her pleasant old face as she gazed, with shaded eyes, along the towing-path in evident expectation of someone's approach. Between the hobs of the parlour grate a newly-lighted fire, in a cold, black state of 'burning-up,' was struggling with the stream of sunbeams that seemed to be pouring into the room only for the purpose of putting it out. The table, with its white cloth and homely invitation to breakfast, was laid for two, though there were signs among the crockery and knives and forks at the teapot end that that place had been set out with some little degree of hesitation.

Presently Mrs. Perry's face showed relief. Taking her hand from her eyes, she resumed the pattens that had been standing on the doormat and started to meet Waveney, who, her 'old man's' coat over his arm, was coming along the towing-path towards her.

'Good morning, Mrs. Perry,' was his greeting while they were still some distance apart. 'Here's a grand morning after the storm! Did the wind keep you awake in the night? I got scarcely any sleep till daylight. I think there has not been much rain, though. I looked out once in the night, and it was not raining then. How is the lady this morning? Is she down yet?'

Cheerily enough he spoke, but even with the morning sunshine full upon it there was not much cheerfulness in his white face, and in spite of the smile on his lip there was a note of anxiety in his voice. Mrs. Perry's tardiness in answering his questions instantly aroused his apprehension.

'Is anything the matter?' he asked.

'No, I don't know as there's anything the matter,' she answered slowly. 'Only, maybe, summut of a surprise. Least-ways, it was to me when I found the door undone, and the bed never been slep' in, and the candle standing on the parlour table, which showed that it must hev been dark when she went. But she has left this for you, sir,' giving him a note in Maggie's handwriting.

Waveney read as follows;

‘WAVENEY DEAREST,—What you said to me this afternoon is *not* possible. I felt it was not at the time, and I am quite convinced of it now. I would to Heaven that it were! But I cannot, I cannot for both our sakes, do as you proposed: it is impossible for me—it would always be impossible—to justify it to myself. So that when you get this I shall be gone—gone, dear, beyond your reach. This is all I ask—that you make no attempt to find me. I feel it is the only way. But, darling, my love was never more utterly yours than it is at this last moment.

MAGGIE.’

They had reached the house. They went into the little parlour. Neither spoke for some minutes. Mrs. Perry stirred the fire and busied herself with the kettle. Waveney was looking out of the window.

He was not much surprised to find her gone. The strangeness of her manner the previous evening had prepared him for almost anything she might do. It had not been the wind that had kept him awake, but anxiety—a vague presentiment of disaster underlying the constant dreadful consciousness that she had changed her mind. And now his presentiment was realised and she was gone. It was only of her he was thinking. Her great nature, with its inexhaustible store of forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and love, put him to shame. In spite of the cruelty of his wrong to her, she had sacrificed herself for him once again. He had driven her forth alone into the world, and she had gone, loving him, forgiving him, without one word of reproach—gone to save them both from sin. For this was the interpretation he gave to her flight.

‘She—the lady—will not be here to breakfast,’ he said presently, without turning round. ‘I want nothing myself.’

Mrs. Perry, indifferent to this statement, continued to coax the fire.

‘I suppose you didn’t hear her go? But I know you did not: you have already implied as much,’ he said, reasoning with himself rather than speaking to Mrs. Perry.

‘Not a sound—which is curious, too, as mine’s nothing but a cat’s sleep. It’s a puzzle to me how she drew the bolts. But we went to bed later than usual, and I may hev been in my first sleep, and dreaming very like.’

‘I suppose she has left nothing else—besides this note, I mean?’

‘I hev’n’t seen nothing else. Now, sir, the kettle biles at last,

and it's been a long time about it, as watched pots allus is. I'll give you a cup o' tea directly. And what will you please to take for——'

'Nothing, nothing; only the tea. I must go back to Smelt-ington immediately; it is just possible I may find some trace of her there. Of course,' he added, doubtfully, 'she gave you no hint that she intended—intended to do this?'

'None as I took as such when given.'

Waveney asked her to explain, and she told him some things Maggie had said to her when they had bidden one another good-night, and how weakness seemed to have made her a little light-headed. The look of suffering in his face grew deeper as he listened.

Having so far yielded to Mrs. Perry's importunity as to swallow his tea, he thanked her for her kindness to Maggie and himself, and gave her such little remuneration as would make her no loser by her hospitality. Then he took his hat and prepared to go; but, pausing at the door, asked Mrs. Perry to look again in Maggie's room to make sure that there was nothing to afford a clue to the direction of her flight. Mrs. Perry complied, and Waveney remained standing at the door.

A peaceful English scene lay before him in a level stretch of pasture and cornfield, the grass and the young corn-blades rising greener and fresher from the rain, which left the hedgerows, hung here and there with the drooping tassels of the hazel, glittering with moisture that flashed, many-coloured, in the sunlight; while the alders contrasted in their sombre foliage with the leafless growths about them, and the sun, rising from the mists of early morning, threw a mocking gladness over all. The water at his feet was lit with the sparkle of the sunshine, shaded now and then by the shadow of a cloud, which, as it passed, gave place to the reflection of unfathomable depths of blue. And as his tired eyes looked at it, they read the cruelty of a universal indifference in this mocking, morning gladness of the scene.

'I hev found this, sir, on a chair in her room.'

Waveney turned and saw Mrs. Perry, whom he had not heard come downstairs, holding Maggie's jacket in her hand.

Without another word they turned back into the parlour. They stood looking each from the jacket to the other's face. They read, each of them, in the face of the other, their own thought. And neither had the courage to give it words.

The strangeness of her manner last night, her refusal to return to Smeltington, her excited and unnatural way of wishing him good-night, the ominous expression in her note, 'gone—gone, dear, beyond your reach,' taken together, gave conjecture the strength of conviction. His eyes kept wandering from the jacket to Mrs. Perry's face, and he saw that his own fear was unmistakably written there.

Some minutes had passed when he inquired at last :

'There was nothing else?'

'Nothing else.'

Then he went to the window—but turned from it with a shudder. He glanced at Mrs. Perry, and saw that she had divined the cause. She had followed his thought to the water.

'Your husband has not come home yet?' he asked presently.

'My old man won't be home till th' evening. He was going straight to his work from where he was sitting up last night. But if anything unusual had occurred—where he's been sitting up—he'd hev been sure to look in on his way to work and hev told me. Though I don't see as he'd be able to tell us nothing, nor to help us, not whatever the circumstances is. But if you wished it, I could tell you where you'd find him. He's working for——'

'No,' he broke in hurriedly, shrinking from being committed to this acceptance of his dread, though Mrs. Perry was but following up his own unexpressed suggestion; 'no, no. I will go to Smeltington first. I must go to Smeltington first. How do we know she has not returned there?'

Mrs. Perry laid the jacket, which she had been holding in her hand, over the back of a chair, and said nothing.

'What does that prove?' he went on excitedly, looking at the jacket. 'It seems to me to prove nothing. It only shows that she left in a hurry, and was probably bewildered and confused. Her note tells me that. And who would not be at stealing away in the night like this? The fear of waking you, and of not being able to open the door without making a noise, was enough to bewilder her. I say it proves nothing—absolutely nothing. Besides,' he added triumphantly, 'she did put on her bonnet. Would she have done that if—— No; obviously not . . . Where is my hat? Well, I am going to Smeltington at once'—he moved towards the door—'and I shall be very much surprised if I don't find some trace of her there.' And so saying, he turned from the

cottage, and hurried along the towing-path at a pace that was half walk, half run.

Mrs. Perry looked after him from her door.

'As sweet a dear as ever breathed, she was,' she muttered to herself very mournfully, her bright old eyes growing dim. 'As sweet a dear as ever breathed. But I ain't—I ain't got no hopes. And the idea . . . that dreadful . . . can't bear it.'

And the tears began to fall on her furrowed cheeks as she turned from the spring sunshine back into the little parlour, where the fire had long conquered the sunbeams, and the old clock was ticking in its corner.

CHAPTER VIII.

No; the wisdom of the wise man consists herein, that he does not judge them; he lets them judge themselves, and merely reads and records their own verdict.

'No,' the landlady said, in answer to his inquiry, 'she has not been home, and we've not seen nor heard anything of her since yesterday afternoon.' He followed the woman into Maggie's little sitting-room, and dealt as best he could with the few questions she asked him. Before she left the room she mentioned that the previous afternoon a gentleman had called who had inquired for Maggie, and upon learning that she was not at home, had said that he would call again, but had not given his name. Waveney received the information indifferently, without troubling to consider who this gentleman could be. He sat down, and tried to decide what course he should next pursue.

Everything in the room was as she had left it yesterday afternoon. Her work-basket stood open upon the table, with the work upon which she had been engaged a little while before he had come to her still lying about it. Nothing had been touched; nothing had been put away. Everything in the room spoke of her, and spoke with that eloquence of inanimate objects which often makes solitude so pathetic.

The sight of these trifles unnerved him. He endeavoured to withdraw his attention. He began to pace the room, hard pressed by the impossibility of suffering this awful dread to hang over him, his reluctance to put the matter into the hands of the public

authorities and risk the exposure that might ensue, and the lingering doubt whether she might not simply have fled from him, and whether he ought not to respect her wish not to be followed. He was coming to the conclusion that he had no alternative but to communicate with the authorities, when his reflections and his pacing were alike brought suddenly to an end.

A minute or two before, he had heard a knock at the front door, of which he had taken no notice, having known that it could not be Maggie, since she would have let herself in without knocking. The door of the sitting-room was ajar; he heard the person who came from the kitchen pass down the passage and speak to the visitor on the doorstep. Then to his amazement he caught a voice he knew inquiring for Maggie. The next moment the door of the sitting-room was opened, and it was Nora who stood before him.

Smiling, triumphant, a little colour brought to her cheek by her walk in the morning air, looking curiously about her at the trifles that had been making so eloquent an appeal to Waveney, Nora came into the room. With contempt for the folly of the absent woman contending with keen animosity against her, with a consciousness of her own humiliation at strife with her sense of present triumph over Waveney, with her habitual cynicism and indifference underlying every other feeling, and not, too, without some perception of the humour of this encounter, Nora seated herself in one of the absent woman's chairs, and waited quietly for Waveney to speak.

'Nora, what has brought you here?'

He was calm, and his words had a peculiar distinctness.

'Don't you think it is rather for me to require an explanation?'

'Nora,' he repeated, 'what has brought you here?'

She paused a moment, but, yielding to the resolution in his face, said, 'A desire to make the acquaintance of your cousin, who, I am told——'

'By whom?'

She smiled, and shook her head.

'Nora, by whom?' he repeated, with the same impressive insistence.

Again she paused, and again she yielded to him. 'Mr. Gilbert,' she said.

'Gilbert!' he echoed. 'So, after all, he did manage to find them, then!'

His astonishment was so genuine that, as she fixed her eyes upon him, a new expression of interest and inquiry came into her face.

‘You said *them*?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Would it not have been better—nearer the mark—to say her?’

He was bewildered, and as genuinely bewildered as he had been genuinely astonished.

‘How long has Mr. Leigh been dead?’

‘He was buried the day before yesterday.’

Nora could not hide the surprise she felt at this unexpected answer. She saw the black crape lying by the work-basket, and for the moment needed no further confirmation.

‘The day you left the Oaks,’ she inquired, ‘you did not return to Waveney?’

‘No, I did not.’

‘You met Mr. Gilbert at the station in the evening?’

‘Yes.’

‘He came with you here?’

‘He walked with me to the door; that was all. It was the night my uncle died. I remained in Smeltington that I might be with him and with my cousin at the last.’

‘You told Mr. Gilbert who lived here?’

‘Certainly not. But what is the meaning of these questions? Though— Ah, yes,’ he added, ‘I think I can guess.’

‘The man is a villain,’ she murmured, to herself rather than to Waveney.

The effect of her abhorrence of Gilbert, of whose perfidy she was receiving another sufficient and disturbing proof, was slightly to soften her feelings towards Waveney. She was on the point of asking him why he had not told her of his meeting with the Leighs, when the recollection of her humiliation in being under an obligation to this man—the recollection of her own secret and the necessity for confessing it—checked her, and prompted her to inquire instead:

‘I was told at the door that your cousin is—away. Of course, you know where she is?’

Nora’s appearance had momentarily put Maggie from his thoughts, and had, for this reason, to some extent proved a relief. But this reference sent his thoughts back to her, and Nora, whose

eyes seldom left him, saw the change her question wrought in his face.

‘I do not know where she is, but I——’ he faltered.

Nora had never seen him look like this. She was inclined to think that she had never seen anyone with quite the expression on his face. She began to feel a little afraid of him.

‘Yes?’ she asked, in an altered voice.

‘I do not know, remember. I say I do not know. But I fear she is——’

‘What? Is what?’ she pressed him.

He covered his face with his hands. ‘Drowned,’ he said.

In spite of that famous self-possession of hers which had never failed her in the emergencies of the drawing-room, Nora found herself as hopelessly unequal to the situation as the most ordinary of women might have been in her place.

This announcement of Waveney’s shocked her.

She was conscious that the passing scene was vastly different from the scene she had expected; that her feelings since she had come into the room had been curiously worked upon and changed. Her nature was not very impressionable, yet the sight of the open work-basket, and of the other little womanly properties lying just as the lost woman had left them, had an appeal which unconsciously reached her. And in conflict with her other feelings, so strongly in conflict that she was quite aware of it, was a distinct sense of relief.

‘What are the grounds for your fear?’ she asked, more gently than she had yet spoken, and as he—he was sitting with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands—did not hear her, she had to repeat the question. When he raised his head, she saw that that look in his face had deepened. He made no attempt to hide his suffering.

‘Her manner was so strange—Mrs. Perry noticed it—and then her way of wishing me good-night,’ he answered, not conscious that his words could mean nothing to Nora. ‘But I put it down to her being tired from the walk, and perhaps frightened by the storm. Who wouldn’t?—who could have suspected that she was bent upon—that?’ He shuddered; but growing calmer, and seeing the look of inquiry in Nora’s face, he gave her some explanation. He told her of their going into the country, of their being overtaken by the storm and compelled to seek shelter in the cottage; of Maggie’s refusal to return to Smeltington, and how

he had left her with Mrs. Perry, and had spent the night at the inn himself. 'When I called for her just now,' he went on, 'I found she was gone, having left this note,' taking it from his pocket, 'and,' he added, beginning to break down again, 'her jacket. Her jacket,' he repeated, 'which she could not have gone without on such a night unless she were beside herself, or—or were going to do what I fear.' And once more he covered his face with his hands, letting Maggie's note drop from his fingers.

Nora picked it up, and read it. There could be no doubt about its meaning; the relations between the writer and her husband needed no further elucidation. But still she was at a loss.

Her jealousy had never been very active. Her feeling had been rather one of resentment that while he had been ungraciously showing her the steep and thorny way of domestic duty, he should himself have been treading, if not exactly a primrose path, at least a path of an inconsistently different kind. She had been jealous; but to a much greater extent she had been resentful. And just as resentful she was still, while her jealousy was passing away. But with the recollection of her own secret obtruding itself upon her, and the sight of Waveney's bowed figure before her eyes, how could she express her resentment? She felt it was hard upon her, for her wrongs were genuine wrongs too.

At last he raised his head, and it was a relief to her. The sight of his bent form, with the sense of powerlessness it gave her, she found immeasurably depressing. He saw the paper in her hand, and he, too, experienced a feeling of relief.

'You understand now, Nora?' he said.

'Yes, I think so,' she answered—and it seemed to her that the time for her own confession had come.

Now Nora, as we have had occasion to observe before, was as good a strategist as any woman, but with Waveney it had never been her custom to use the careful methods of diplomacy. So, with a return of her old smile, which seemed to ease her feelings by tending to bring matters back to a more familiar aspect, she said:

'As we appear to be in the mood for confidences, will you listen to me now?'

He raised his head and fixed his eyes upon her.

'Can you let me have 300*l*.?' she inquired, her smile deepening as she caught the humour of it.

'What do you want the money for?' he asked—asked very

wearily: if it had been three times the amount, her request would scarcely have moved him.

The question, of course, was inevitable. 'I owe Mr. Gilbert 300*l.*,' she said.

Waveney was moved this time.

'What do you say, Nora?' he cried. 'You owe Gilbert 300*l.*! No, it can't be. What is it for?'

'I borrowed 300*l.* from him some time ago; and the time has now come for him to be repaid,' she said. 'I wanted the money for a bill.'

Waveney had a moment's hesitation. 'Very well,' he said; 'he shall be paid.' It was not the time, and he had not the spirit, if indeed he had the right, to question her further just then.

A long silence followed, during which Nora's spirits sank low. As an attempt, however, to maintain the conversation in its present more familiar tone and prevent it from relapsing to its former and very depressing tone of seriousness, she inquired, as lightly as she could:

'You will be able to let him have the money before long, I suppose?'

'I will attend to it,' he said, 'as soon as I return to the Court.'

The attempt was quite unsuccessful. Her smile faded away as lingering sunbeams will sometimes fade before a gathering tempest. Not that there was anything tempestuous in Waveney's face or manner; on the contrary, both had grown quite calm. But there was a terrible seriousness about him, which she was compelled to recognise, and the whole situation was serious.

'Nora, one thing, I think, is plain enough—that matters with us have come to a crisis. We cannot go on living as we have lived.'

She remained silent, but he saw that her attention was given to him.

'To talk about our making a fresh start, turning over a new leaf, trying to make the future happier than the past, and so on, seems to me a simple waste of time. I see no prospect of the future being any happier than the past. On the contrary, on the lines on which we appear to be moving, every day is likely to find us further apart. Obviously, the matter is in your hands rather than mine: you have the graver cause for complaint. But I think we shall do no good in any case by ignoring——'

She interrupted him. 'You propose that we shall separate?' she asked.

'Well, scarcely that. I mean something more or less informal: some arrangement by which——'

'I understand. No; I think there need not be much formality. Yes, I consent,' she said.

'The details will have to be settled by-and-by,' he went on. 'I must leave you in a few minutes. I will only say that whatever monetary arrangement—perhaps you will consult your mother—you decide upon shall be made. Of course, you will take the house in Gifford Street. If you think it well that we should sometimes be seen together—let that be in the bond. At the best, it is a dismal business, and goodness knows!' he added, 'I feel how much I have to answer for. I have done my best to wreck our chances of happiness: I know——'

She checked him again. 'No, it has not been quite a success,' she said. 'I will talk to my mother. It will be a little difficult, I expect, to make her see the point of it, for she is rather slow to accept this kind of arrangement. My mother's standard of success is not high. But I will talk to her, and if we arrange to be seen together sometimes, I have no doubt that will have a soothing effect upon her.'

'Oh, certainly; we can arrange for that,' he consented.

'Very good: I will lay stress upon it,' she said.

At that moment their conversation was interrupted, as Waveney's meditations had been some time before, by the sound of a voice in the hall—of a voice with which they were unpleasantly familiar.

'It is——' she murmured, faintly.

'Yes, it is he.'

Waveney rose to his feet. The door opened; and Mr. Gilbert was shown into the room.

CHAPTER IX.

Who shall heal murder? what is done is done:

Go forth! fulfil thy days! and be thy deeds unlike the last!

GILBERT's position was unquestionably embarrassing. He had been making a few little inquiries about Maggie, when, without any fair warning, the landlady had opened the door, and had compelled him to come in. Still, Mr. Gilbert was not wanting in assurance; his nerve was good, and his readiness of resource was admirable.

'This is an unexpected pleasure,' he said, with a smile, addressing himself to them both.

Waveney did not respond. 'Will you sit down?' he asked, unsympathetically. During the few minutes that had passed since he had first heard Gilbert's voice, he had determined upon his line of action.

'Miss Leigh is out, they tell me,' said Gilbert in his friendly way, taking a chair near the table. Waveney was standing by Nora's side.

'I have one or two things to say to you, and I may as well take this opportunity of saying them,' Waveney went on, speaking with easy deliberation. 'In the first place, my wife has told me that you have been kind enough to lend her——'

'Don't speak of it,' Gilbert interrupted him, looking inquiringly at Nora, and much relieved to see in her face a negative to his inquiry.

'You shall hear from me about that matter in a day or two. I am sorry Lady Keyworth has been in your debt so long.'

'No hurry; no hurry,' said Gilbert, with the same friendliness of manner. 'It was a pleasure to me to do it.'

'The other matter is this.' Waveney's tone changed. 'As you would naturally expect, I have received from Miss Leigh an account of your visit to her father in Burders Street, and also much interesting information as to your history and antecedents.'

'Indeed. Yes?'

'Yes; a variety of information. And,' Waveney continued, 'I feel that it is my duty to give my friends—*our* friends—the benefit of the information I have received from Miss Leigh, and I leave it to you to consider whether it is likely to act to your prejudice. I think myself it will—I am sure myself it will; and for that reason I give you this warning. You understand? I wish I could do more. It is a small return for the shattered life and the incalculable misery——'

'It is almost like returning good for evil, in fact,' smiled Gilbert, recovering his usual confidence, which had been slightly shaken for the moment—but for a tendency to glance a little restlessly at Nora, he would have seemed to be himself again. 'No, Keyworth, it won't do; it won't do. If you had had my experience, you would have played your cards differently; or rather you would have seen that you had no cards to play. It won't do. If it comes to reviving old associations, I can revive

associations in a way that will be very unpleasant both to you and Lady Keyworth. My antecedents, as you pleasantly put it—well, my antecedents are what they are; but your uncle—eh? No, it won't do. You forget. You have forgotten another consideration—an important one, too, in its way. The law——'

'Whatever my husband may forget, *I* do not forget,' said Nora very distinctly, fixing her eyes upon Gilbert. 'I think you would do well to accept my husband's warning.'

Waveney turned to Nora for an explanation; her eyes, however, were still upon Gilbert. Another change had come into his bearing. His naturally somewhat sinister face frankly revealed the savagery within him—as frankly as it had been revealed during his lonely stroll at the Oaks. The attention of all three was too much occupied with the matter in hand for them to have noticed that the landlady was speaking to another visitor in the hall—a visitor this time whose voice neither Waveney nor Nora was in a position to recognise.

'Accept your husband's warning?' muttered Gilbert. 'You wish to drive me from London?'

'Ah, I don't say that. I think your leaving London is immaterial. Men of your kind are too plentiful in London for the gain of your absence to be appreciably felt. I am afraid so. No, keep your seat. There is no need to be violent. But I do suggest some change in your—habits, let us say, and places of resort; that in future you seek your friends and amusements in another sphere.'

'My God!' he muttered, starting to his feet.

'Now to return to what I was saying. As I cannot bring you to justice——'

Waveney paused.

A tall, slender, middle-aged woman, with iron-grey hair, possessive dark eyes, and a strained intensity of emotion in her white face which gave added power to its natural strength, had entered the room and was standing beside Gilbert, who, as he was looking before him, had not yet seen her, though her eyes were riveted upon him. She had been standing there several seconds when, following the direction of Waveney's gaze, he at last turned round. A cry broke from him, and he fell back from her as terror-stricken as though she had been a woman risen from the dead. Nora had moved from her seat, and had laid her hand on Waveney's arm. Both waited for the new-comer to speak.

'*I can bring him to justice.*'

Involuntarily Nora's hold of his arm tightened.

'I think I heard you say,' addressing Waveney, 'that you could not bring him to justice.'

'Yes; I was saying——'

'I repeat: *I can bring him to justice.*'

'Then you are——' he asked.

'His wife.'

Nora, her presence of mind restored, returned to her chair. The lady, still addressing Waveney, continued, 'I am a—a friend of Miss Leigh. You know her as Miss Leigh? Yes. Perhaps you have heard her speak of Mrs. Latimer?'

'I have heard her speak of Mrs. Latimer's kindness.'

'May I ask to whom I am speaking?'

'I am Miss Leigh's cousin. My name is Keyworth.'

'It is necessary that we should understand one another. Will you tell me whether you are aware of his,' pointing to Gilbert, 'share in the Leighs' history? Don't speak. I see your answer. It was to that the remark of yours I overheard upon entering the room referred? Yes, I see.' She paused. None of them spoke. 'I have known Miss Leigh nearly as long as she has been in Smeltington, but until the day before yesterday only knew her as Miss Murray. I had never seen her father. He very rarely went out, I believe, and I never came to this house in his lifetime. I discovered that he was Richard Leigh by seeing his name on the coffin when they were about to lower it into the grave.' She paused again. She wiped her parched lips and added, 'My intention in coming here this morning was to make Miss Leigh a confession.'

Gilbert was standing by the fireplace, and Waveney, as he looked at his shrinking form, had no doubt that this frail and suffering, but implacable-looking, woman had the power over him she had claimed. Though she had hitherto addressed Waveney, her eyes had been for the most part fixed upon her husband. She now seated herself, and, her head bent, her eyes upon the ground, seemed to be passing through the agony of an inward struggle. When she again raised her eyes, she fixed them once more upon Gilbert, and continued to look at him without speaking. The wretched man's courage and resource had forsaken him.

'I see in this meeting the will of God,' she said, speaking

slowly and calmly. 'If I had had any doubt about His will before, I should have none now. He has brought us together that He may punish us together. I thank Him that He has given me so long for repentance.'

'I see in you a madwoman,' muttered Gilbert hoarsely.

'You remember my presentiment when we parted? I told you we should meet again. Is my presentiment realised?' Then turning to Waveney and rising, she continued, still speaking very calmly, though with slightly more animation, 'Now I will tell you my story. Perhaps you know who I am?'

'No,' he said doubtfully.

'My first husband was John Knight,' Gilbert moved a step or two towards her, as if to attempt to prevent her confession. But upon Waveney's placing himself beside her, he fell back to his position by the fireplace. 'Let us come at once to the fatal night. As you must have heard, on that night Richard Leigh and my husband's friend,' looking towards Gilbert, 'dined at our—. But no; in justice to myself I must first tell you something of my own history. It will not take long; I have not much to tell; and it will be easier for me to speak of what occurred that night if you know a little about what preceded it.'

She paused a moment, and sat down again.

'I was then twenty-one, and had been married three years. We had no child. Nothing could have been more uneventful than were the first two and a half years of my marriage. I was not happy. I was disappointed and discontented, but for the most commonplace reasons. My husband was fond of me, and we were comfortably off; but as he was at his business all day, and we knew scarcely anyone at Hampstead, my life was very dull. I was pretty, and took the sugar-plum view of existence not uncommon with girls of that age. I had married less from love than because—oh, because, I suppose, to be married at eighteen was a triumph. Well, about six months before the catastrophe, my husband brought home his friend'—looking at Gilbert—'and before long I found myself relieving the monotony by flirting with him. He often came to our house during the day, which was my dullest time, while my husband was at his business in the City. My husband knew of his visits, but not of their frequency. Little by little the position changed; I began, I am afraid, to grow fond of him, or at all events he succeeded in making himself necessary to me. In my groping, girlish way I felt, I fancy, I was taking

a kind of justifiable revenge upon my husband for the disappointment of my marriage.

‘So matters went on for some three or four months. One of my few friends at Hampstead was Mrs. Leigh. It was she who discovered how often I saw Mr. Rees, but it was Mr. Leigh, I think, who first suspected our relations. He hinted his suspicions to my husband. My husband was exceedingly angry, and refused to believe it. So that the only result of Mr. Leigh’s interference was that my friendship with his wife declined, and my other friendship steadily ripened.’

She paused, and the shade on her face deepened.

‘Now we can come to the fatal night. Stay—there is one other fact I must give you. For some time my husband had not been on good terms with his partner, owing partly to my husband’s having developed a fondness for racing, somewhat to the injury of the credit of the firm, and partly to my husband’s resentment of Mr. Leigh’s mistaken interest in me. Need I say that I never lost an opportunity of making matters worse between them? Well, one evening Mr. Leigh and Mr. Rees dined at our house. After dinner I left them, as usual, and went to the drawing-room.’ She wiped her dry lips. Her voice shook painfully as she continued: ‘The remembrance of what followed is too horrible. . . . After I had been alone in the drawing-room some time I happened to go downstairs to fetch something, and of all that occurred that night this is the only detail I have forgotten. I can never recall what took me from the drawing-room. However, I was stopped at the foot of the stairs, at the dining-room door, by hearing loud voices within. Every word they said reached me, and I heard Mr. Leigh once more calumniate me to my husband—it was calumny: he went beyond the truth. I heard my husband cry, “It’s a lie!” I heard their chairs fall. I knew they were fighting. The noise had brought our servants into the hall, but I motioned to them not to stir. When I opened the dining-room door Mr. Leigh and my husband were locked in each other’s arms, Leigh with his hand at my husband’s throat. Then I saw him, pointing to Gilbert, ‘seize a knife that had been left on the side-board and plunge it into my husband. Leigh relaxed his grasp, and whether he drew the knife from my husband’s body or whether it was put into his hand, in the confusion of the moment I could not tell; but when the servants entered the room he was standing over the body holding the knife. In an instant Rees was by my

side. "You saw him do it?" he cried, and—God forgive that awful lie!—I answered, "Yes." Leigh was convicted. I would not have told the truth to save him from the gallows.'

The effect of this narrative upon Gilbert was singular. It seemed to put new life into him. 'Go on, go on,' he said, with a kind of jocose ferocity. 'I deny every word of it. I ask Keyworth and his wife to witness that I do. But go on, go on.'

Waveney begged her to continue. Nora's thoughts were varied and painful; but predominant with her was a kind of speculative amazement, as of one brought face to face with a wholly new and unlooked-for experience.

'From that hour, from that night,' continued the unhappy woman, 'my whole nature changed. Pity died in my heart. Several times during the evening I had to repeat my lie to the doctor and others, and not once—not for a moment—did I feel compunction. I persisted in my statement, and it was universally believed. I never once pitied him. No one knew it, but my whole nature was changed. As I look back at myself now I feel I must have been the victim of some species of insanity. Crime of all kinds, but especially murder, obtained an indescribable fascination for me. I lived with my sister until I married again, and as the police reports in our daily paper did not satisfy me, I used to procure other papers of a lower class without her knowledge. I read these records of crime as a soldier reads the description of a battle. I felt that between these outcasts and myself there was a bond of sympathy. It never occurred to me to pity their victims. Yet of this change in me my friends knew nothing. On the contrary, they thought I had been softened by my trial. About this time I lost my mother, after a severe illness through which I nursed her. She had always been fonder of my sister than of me, but for some reason or other she would never let me leave her. For three weeks I never went to bed; night after night I sat up with her. Yet the truth is, my mother's loss, when the end came, scarcely affected me at all.

'Well, against the wish of everybody, by-and-by I married again. I did care for you,' turning to Gilbert, 'but, if I had not cared for you, my sense of partnership in your guilt would have drawn me to you. I soon discovered that I had married a mere adventurer; yet the first years of my new life were happy. I still had the gentleness of manner which had deceived people so, but I surprised even my husband by the heartless unscrupulousness

with which I threw myself into his life. The spell, however, was broken at last.

‘We had two children, and they and my husband were the only beings whose death could have affected me. I lost my father when I had been married a year, but I felt his loss as little as I had felt the loss of my mother. But, as I say, at last the spell was broken. In the course of our travels, which were extensive, I found myself, in a certain city in the South, alone with my children. My husband had returned to England upon business. Well, here my two children—my little boy first—were struck down with fever, and taken from me at the interval of only a week. As I nursed my youngest I felt that I had taken the fever too, and prayed that my strength might last as long as the child needed it. I knew that she must follow her brother. My prayer was granted. I took to my bed the very day my little girl was buried. Then follows a blank. The first object upon which my eyes opened when I returned to consciousness was a little black crucifix hanging on the white wall opposite my bed. I was in a convent hospital. My nurses were kind, and took great care of me, but I recovered slowly. When, however, I did at last rise from my sick-bed, it was to find that the power of the evil spirit, which had held me since that fatal night, was broken. My madness, I think, must have expended itself in my delirium. My nurses, fortunately, were not able to follow my ravings, as I seldom spoke in their language; still, I discovered that at times I had made use of it, and they had gathered a vague idea of what my life had been. During the last stage of my convalescence they contrived that I should often be attended by an old priest, of whom I keep the kindest remembrance. He made no obtrusive attempt to convert me to Catholicism, but, knowing that I had some great sin upon my conscience, was constantly, delicately and gently, urging me to relieve it. God knows that but for one consideration I should have returned to England and at once confessed my perjury. That one consideration was my husband. I looked back with horror at my married life; but my love for him was not perceptibly changed. On leaving my nurses and the old priest, I rejoined my husband.

‘But the old life was impossible. I soon came to feel as much horror for him as for some time I had felt for his way of living. Then he was brutal to me. He did his best to break my spirit; but I was no longer a girl, I was a woman—a woman with a will

as firm as his own—and instead of yielding to him I made him afraid of me, and his fear was not diminished by his knowing that I had repented of my share in the tragedy of my first husband's death. At last I left him; by the death of my sister I had secured a small income, my share of our inheritance from my father having been lost by my husband. When we parted I had the promise of another child.

'The next years of my life were a time of exquisite misery. The change which had come with my illness worked itself out. My remorse deepened. I felt I should never know peace while my crime remained unatoned for, and yet I could never bring myself to return to England and make my confession. I tried to quiet my conscience with all kinds of reasoning. I told myself that it was just that Leigh should be punished for his wrong to me; that, if I did confess after all these years, I should not be believed. My child appealed to me to do nothing rash. I trifled with my position—in this way. I would now and then visit England, to have it in my power to put matters right if I chose. I even set to work to trace the servants who had been witnesses at the trial; I succeeded in finding one of them, and have often seen her since. But I never took a decided step, and I never formed any definite resolution with myself either to remain silent or to speak. But a crisis came at last in the death of my little girl, and then, in my loneliness and misery, I determined to make an end.

'I was in Italy at the time, and set out for England; but when I was upon the point of consulting a lawyer as to the best course to adopt, I discovered that Leigh had escaped. With a complete revulsion of feeling, I resolved to leave matters as they were.

'I have no more to tell. I have not left England since that day. I have seen my husband only once, and then he did not see me. I have lived in Smeltington four years. I chose the place partly from its being as unlike the scenes among which I had lived abroad as any place I could find, partly to inflict upon myself a kind of penance. Now,' she added wearily, while the animation faded from her face, 'you have the whole story of my life. It has for years and years been one of exquisite misery. Consider that I place it unconditionally at your disposal.'

Gilbert was the first to break the silence that followed. There had been an unpleasantly meditative look in his eyes for some time, and there was now an ominous confidence and satisfaction about his entire person. He had recovered his habitual assurance.

'Do you know where the servant you traced is at the present time?' he inquired.

'She is dead.'

'Indeed! But it is immaterial. She was not prepared to admit that she had perjured herself at the trial?'

'No; it was only I who did that.'

'Exactly; and your admission comes a quarter of a century too late, and without a tittle of evidence to support it. It is the unhappy result of hallucination, nothing more. You have developed a morbid state of mind. People constantly give themselves up to the police from just such hallucinations as yours. Another man might have been hurt at the atrocities you attribute to me; but I sympathise with your state of health, and forgive you. Still, hallucination is dangerous. It does show that there is something wrong—something very wrong; it suggests a need of special treatment. It is a form of insanity. If you can bring such an accusation as this against your own husband, who is there who can feel safe?'

Not a word passed her lips; and after a short pause Waveney said huskily, 'Go on with what you have to say.'

'It is my duty to consider this very carefully. I think it is a case for a specialist's opinion. Then, remember, I am your husband. After years of separation the will of Heaven has brought us together again. Suppose I claim your society for the future? You are my wife. Who can part us? Still, I have not forgotten that our married life was not so happy as it should have been, and I admit I feel some doubt as to the advisability of trying the experiment of its renewal. Well, I must take time to think it over—especially as regards your health. That makes me anxious. But,' turning to Waveney, 'if you have no further claim upon me, I think I will leave you for the present. Have you any such claim?' he inquired, looking from one to the other.

'No, no,' said Waveney, whose abhorrence of the man overwhelmed every other feeling. 'But stay—you will accept my—my warning?'

Gilbert paused at the door, and for an instant the evil within him showed again in his treacherous eyes.

'Yes,' he muttered, with an oath.

The next moment he had left them.

A great change had come over his unhappy wife. She was sitting with her head thrown back, her eyes closed, and every sign

in her face of physical and nervous exhaustion. Her breath came with difficulty; her cheek was coloured with a hectic flush that had the effect of restoring to it for the moment something of its younger beauty.

'I am not afraid of him,' she said presently, rousing herself. 'He dare not try to make me live with him, and I don't think it is worth his while to put me in an asylum, even if he could do it. But is it true? Can I make no reparation for the past? Tell me what you think.'

'I think,' Waveney said, 'you have made all the reparation in your power. Poor Mr. Leigh has passed beyond the reach of reparation, and I am the only person left—at least, I fear so—who has any knowledge of his history. I admit I have wished that the man who has left us might be punished; still, may it not be the truest punishment to let him live? He will get his reward sooner or later. . . . But if you will let me, I will make sure that he does not molest you.'

'I am not afraid of him,' she answered. Then looking at Waveney, she added half reproachfully, half wistfully, 'I don't deserve that you should speak to me like that.'

'I can think only of what you have suffered,' he said.

'Heaven knows what that has been for years and years! But I feel it will not last much longer. My health has been failing for some time, and the strain of these last days has broken me down altogether. My strength is ebbing from me—and thank God for it!' she added fervently. As Waveney looked at her, he saw, or thought he saw, confirmation of her words in that ominous flush in her cheek.

A few minutes later, when Waveney had spoken to the landlady, they left the house together, and the unhappy lady showed so much weakness in walking that Waveney and Nora accompanied her to her door. There is but one fact more to be recorded in connection with her history, and we will record it at once. Before many months had passed, Waveney learned that her presentiment had been fulfilled—that death had come to her also.

Through the ashy heart of Smeltington, and down its grimy arteries flowing with machinery-deadened, work-stained humanity, Waveney and Nora, unaffected by the contrast between the oppressive reality of everything about them and the strange, unlikely revelations they had just been listening to, were making their way

to the place where the carriage was waiting to take Nora back to the Oaks.

Waveney's feelings towards her had softened. His trouble about Maggie, his sympathy with the suffering of the woman they had left, the consciousness that he had used Nora very ill, the fact that they were about to part, tended to change his feelings and give him a desire to touch a kinder note during their last moments together.

'You will tell your mother of our plans?' he asked presently, after the pause which had succeeded the comments upon the scene they had witnessed.

'Yes,' she said wearily, as if the proposal were an old one and he had troubled her with it often before. 'I will talk to her about it.'

'There is nothing else we can settle now, I think. My brain reels from what we have just gone through: I don't feel equal to going into things much. Make any arrangement you and your mother think fit. Make the position as tolerable as you can.' Did she detect the slightly softened tone of his voice?

Whether she did or not, there was no corresponding softening in her. A wretched sense of the unsatisfactoriness of things weighed her down, and Waveney's responsibility for it was much too great for her to feel forgivingly towards him.

'I will talk it over with her,' she assented.

They scarcely spoke again until they had reached the carriage.

'Good-bye, Nora,' he said gently, leaning through the carriage window. 'I am sorry . . . I mean I hope things will go better with you; I hope you will have a better time. But I think it is wiser that we——'

'I thought all that was settled,' she impatiently interrupted him. 'Isn't it?'

He drew back his head. 'Good-bye,' he said.

'Oh, good-bye,' she repeated. 'Tell William to drive as fast as he can, will you? I want to get back.'

And Nora settled herself among the cushions.

(To be continued.)

